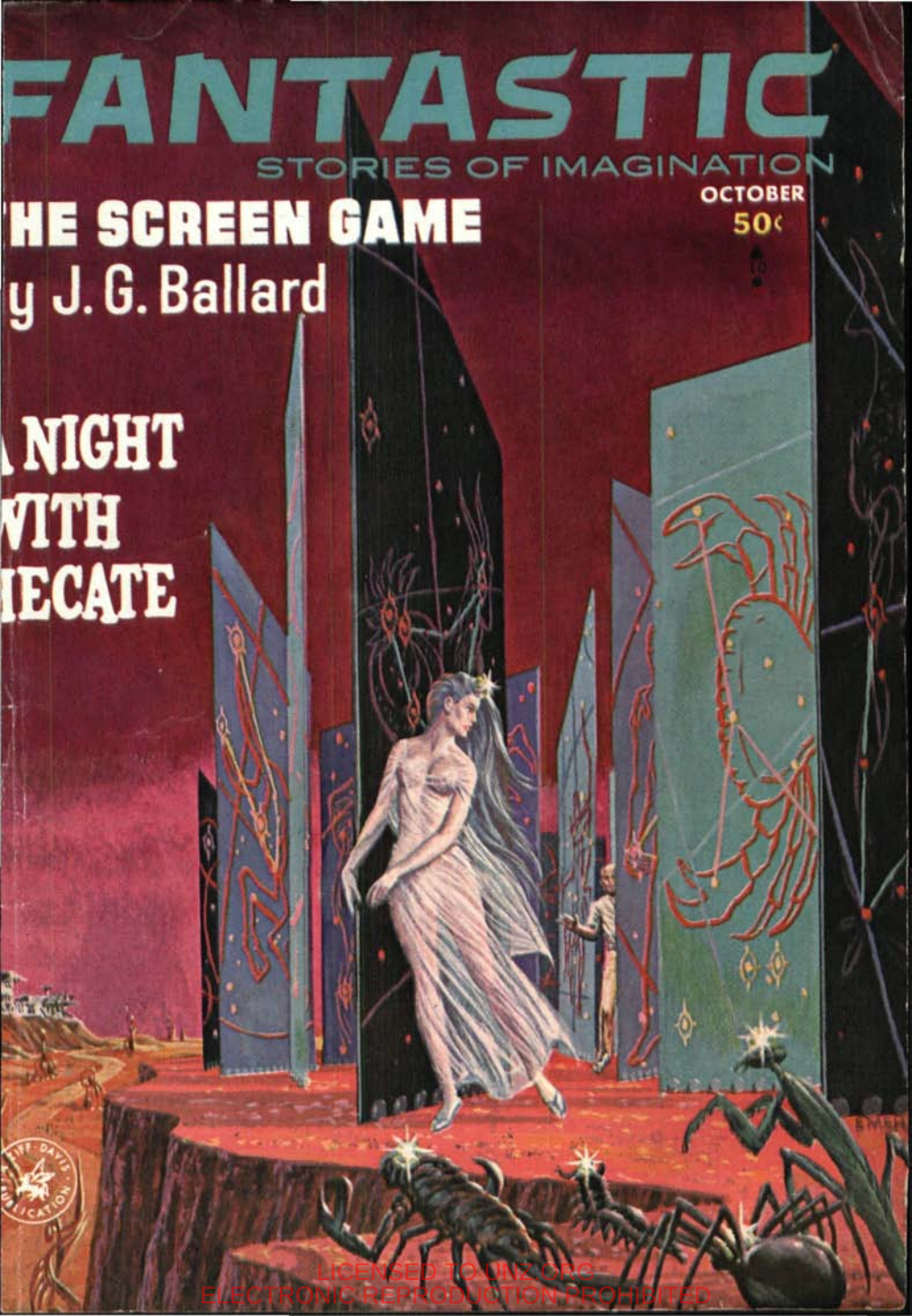
FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION
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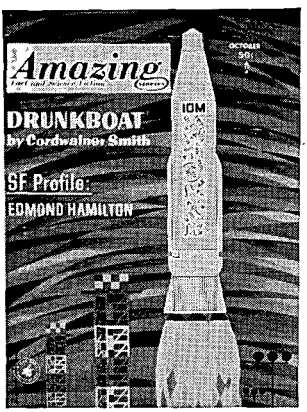

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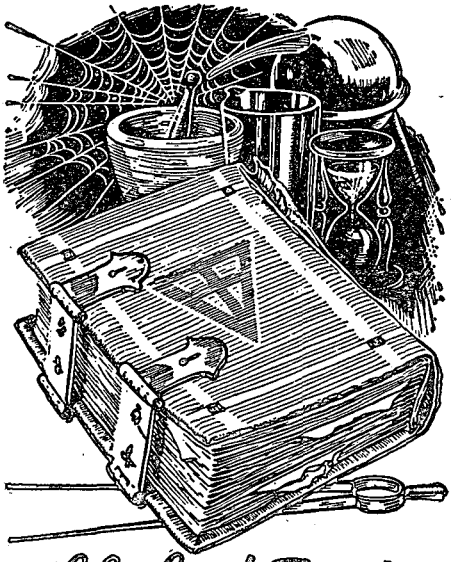

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STORIES OF IMAGINATION

OCTOBER 1963
Volume 12 Number 10

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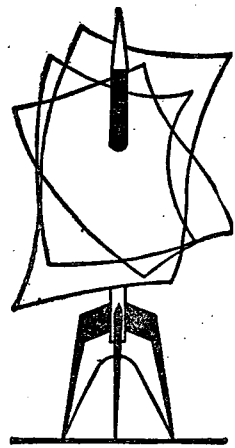

EDITORIAL

APPLYING the fruits of science for the benefit of the female of the species has lately been the theoretical concern of a British scholar-scientist, Prof. M.W. Thring. To him, the true aim of applied science should not be to raise living standards, but to increase human happiness. (Note: the two are not always—indeed, usually rarely—synonymous.)

Addressing himself to the problem of robots for housewives, the good professor feels that while most women enjoy such creative domestic functions as cooking and decorating, they despise the boring routine of peeling potatoes, sweeping floors and making beds. His objective: to get the domestic revolution to the point where robots will perform these mechanical household operations. When this is reached, he said, the housewife should be able to turn a switch and instruct the robot to make the beds, change the sheets, dust, vacuum, clear and lay the table, and run the dishwasher and washing machine.

The operational set-up for such a robot is theoretically simple. According to Thring, the biggest problem is to enable a domestic robot to differentiate among a large number of objects—lest the baby on the floor be put into the dishwasher, and the dirty dish into the crib. The final obstacle, says Thring, is to house-train the robot so that it would not only be able to recognize different things, but would also know where they are, where they ought to be, and where to find them if they are in neither place.

We have news for the good professor: housewives have for generations been trying to train their present mechanical slaves to do just such a thing.

Oh, yes—the name of the present device? Husbands.—NL

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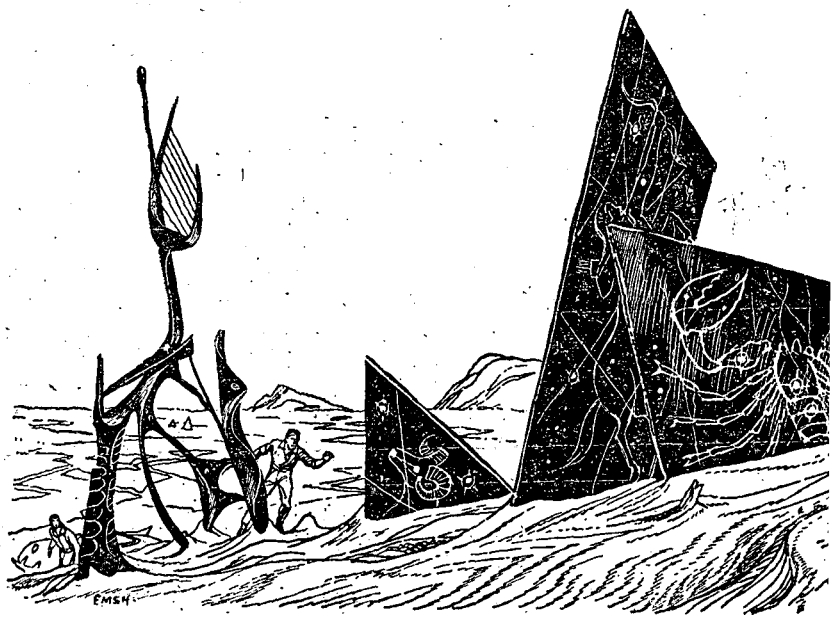
the Screen Game

By J. G. BALLARD

Illustrator EMSH

The weird world of the Red Sands raised questions of illusion . . . and the strange Zodiacal screens became a barrier maze to what might have been reality. For after all, how much reality can we stand?



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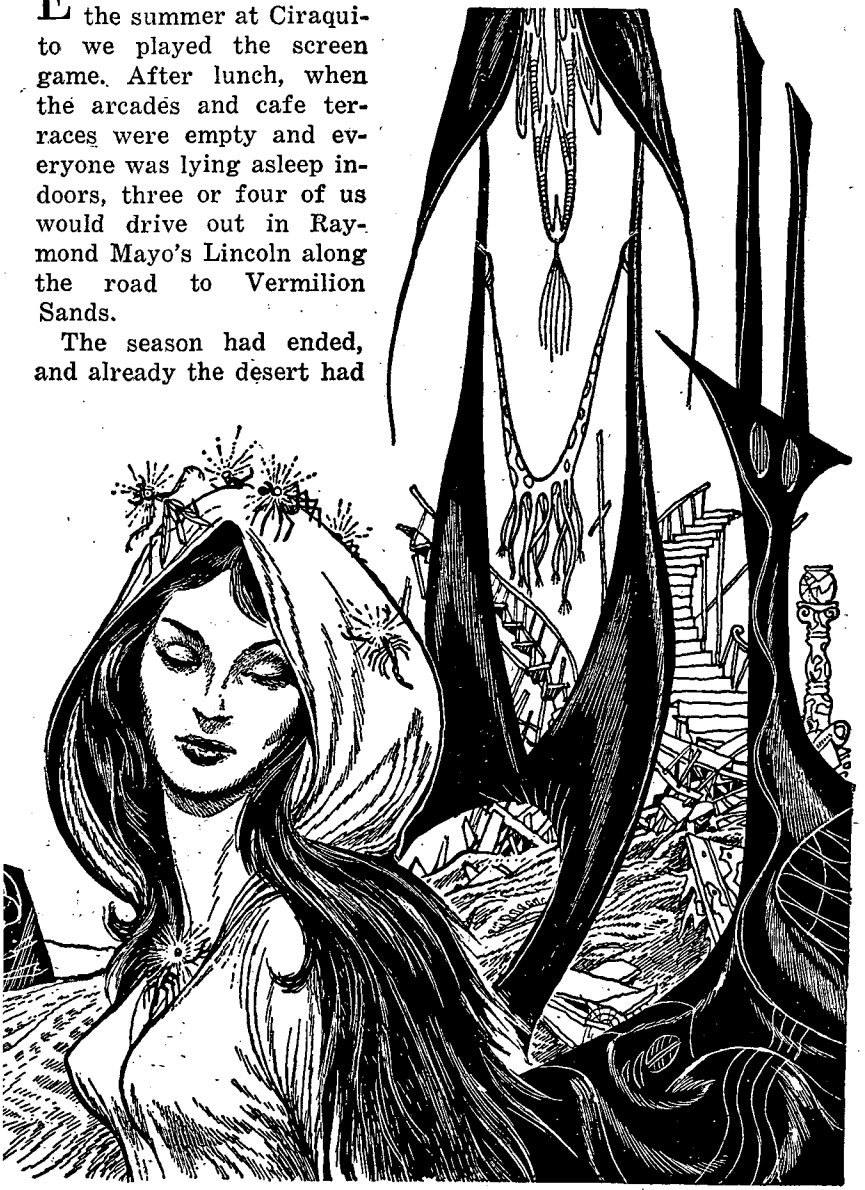
EVERY afternoon during the summer at Ciraquito we played the screen game. After lunch, when the arcades and cafe terraces were empty and everyone was lying asleep indoors, three or four of us would drive out in Raymond Mayo's Lincoln along the road to Vermilion Sands.

The season had ended, and already the desert had



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begun to move in again for the summer, drifting against the yellowing shutters of the cigarette kiosks and surrounding the town with immense banks of luminous ash. Along the horizon the flat-topped mesas rose into the sky like the painted cones of a volcano jungle. The beach houses had been empty for weeks, and abandoned sand-yachts stood in the center of the lakes, embalmed in the opaque heat. Only the highway showed any signs of activity, the motion sculpture of concrete ribbon unfolding across the landscape.

Twenty miles from Ciraquito, where the highway forks to Red Beach and Vermilion Sands, we turned onto the remains of an old gravel track that ran away among the sand-reefs. Only a year earlier this had been a well-kept private road, but the ornamental gateway lay collapsed to one side, and the guard-house was a nesting place for scorpions and sand-rays.

Few people ever ventured far up the road. Continuous rock-slides disturbed the area, and large sections of the surface had slipped away into the reefs. In addition a curious but unmistakable atmosphere of menace hung over the entire zone, marking it off from the remainder of the desert. The hanging galleries of the reefs were more convoluted and sinister, like the tortured Gothic demons of medieval cathedrals. Massive towers of obsidian reared over the roadway like giant stone gallows, their eroded cornices streaked with iron-red dust. The light seemed duller, unlike the rest of the desert, occasionally flaring into a sepulchral glow as if some subterranean fire-cloud had boiled to the surface of the rocks. The surrounding peaks and spires shut out the desert plain, and the only sounds were the echoes of the engine growling among the hills and the piercing cries of the sand-rays wheeling over the open mouths of the reefs like hieratic birds.

FOR half a mile we followed the road as it wound like a petrified snake above the reefs, and our conversation would become more sporadic and then fall away entirely, resuming only when we began our descent through a shallow valley. A few abstract sculptures stood by the roadside. Once these were sonic, responding to the slipstream of a passing car with a series of warning vibratos, but now the Lincoln passed them unrecognized.

Abruptly, around a steep bend, the reefs and peaks vanished, and the wide expanse of an inland sand-lake lay before us, the great summer house of Lagoon West on its shore. Fragments of light haze hung over the dunes like un-

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tethered clouds. The tires cut softly through the cerise sand, and soon we were over-running what appeared to be the edge of an immense chessboard of black and white marble squares. More statues appeared, some buried to their heads, others toppled from their plinths by the drifting dunes.

Looking out at them this afternoon, I felt, not for the first time, that the whole landscape was compounded of illusion, the hulks of fabulous dreams drifting across it like derelict galleons. As we followed the road towards the lake, the huge wreck of Lagoon West passed us slowly on our left. Its terraces and balconies were deserted, and the once marble-white surface was streaked and lifeless. Staircases ended abruptly in mid-flight, and the floors hung like sagging marquees. A maze of twisted corridors, the summer house tilted into the desert sand like a huge contorted orchid.

In the center of the terrace the screens stood where we had left them the previous evening, their zodiacal emblems flashing like heraldic serpents. We walked across to them through the hot sunlight, and for the next hour we played the screen game, pushing the screens along their intricate pathways, advancing and retreating across the smooth marble floor.

No one watched us, but once, fleetingly, I thought I saw a tall aloof figure in a blue cape hidden in the shadows of a second-floor balcony.

"Emerelda!"

On a sudden impulse I shouted to her, but almost without moving she had vanished among the hibiscus and bougainvillea. As her name echoed away among the dunes I knew that we had made our last attempt to lure her from the balcony.

"Paul." Twenty yards away, Raymond and Tony had reached the car. "Paul, we're leaving."

Turning my back to them, I looked up at the great bleached hulk of Lagoon West leaning into the sunlight. Somewhere, along the shore of the sand-lake, music was playing faintly, echoing among the exposed quartz veins. A few isolated chords at first, the fragments hung on the afternoon air, the sustained tremolos suspended above my head like the humming of invisible insects.

As the phrases coalesced, reminding me of the tragic events of the previous summer, I stepped towards the dunes at the edge of the lake. Unlike Raymond and Tony, I knew what would bring Emerelda from her balcony. One night, two months earlier, I had driven alone to Lagoon West, and waited for her among the screens. Suddenly I heard feet racing towards me, but unable to restrain

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myself I ran back to my car. As I drove off I caught a final glimpse of a white distraught face watching me from the colonnade.

Then, too, I had heard the same music playing, the threnody of the dying sculptures, and I remembered when we had first played the screen game at Lagoon West, and I remembered the last tragic battle with the jewelled insects, and I remembered Emerelda Garland. . . .

* * *

I FIRST saw Emerelda Garland the previous summer, shortly after the abstract film company arrived in Ciraquito and was invited by Charles Van Stratten to use the locations at Lagoon West. The company, Orpheus Productions Inc.—known to the aficionados of the cafe terraces such as Raymond Mayo and Tony Sapphire as the 'ebb tide' of the *Nouvelle. Vague*—was one of those experimental, semi-amateur units whose output is solely destined for a single rapturous showing at the Cannes Film Festival, and who rely for their financial backing on the generosity of the many millionaire dilettantes who apparently feel a compulsive need to cast themselves in the role of Lorenzo de Medici.

Not that there was anything amateurish about the equipment and technical resources of Orpheus Productions. The fleet of location trucks and recording studios which descended on Ciraquito on one of those empty August afternoons looked like the entire D-Day task force, and even the more conservative estimates of the budget for *Aphrodite '70*, the film we helped to make at Lagoon West, amounted to at least twice the gross national product of a central American republic. What was amateurish was rather the complete indifference to normal commercial restraints, and the unswerving dedication to the highest aesthetic standards.

All this, of course, was made possible by the largesse of Charles Van Stratten. To begin with, when we were first co-opted into *Aphrodite '70*, some of us were inclined to be maliciously amused by Charles's naive attempts to produce a masterpiece ("after all," Raymond Mayo would say, excusing Charles' latest gaucherie, "he is the last of the new vogue"), but later we all realized that there was something strangely touching about Charles' earnestness and single-mindedness. None of us, however, was aware of the private tragedy which drove him on through the heat and dust of that summer at Lagoon West, and the grim nemesis waiting for him behind the canvas floats and stage props.

At the time he became the sole

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owner of Orpheus Productions, Charles Van Stratten had recently celebrated his fortieth birthday, but to all intents he was still a quiet and serious undergraduate. A scion of one of the world's wealthiest banking families, in his early twenties he had twice been briefly married, first to a Neapolitan countess, and secondly to a Hollywood starlet, but the most influential figure in his life was Charles' mother. This domineering harridan, who sat like an immense ormolu spider in her sombre Edwardian mansion on Park Avenue, surrounded by dark galleries filled with Rubens and Rembrandt, had been widowed shortly after Charles' birth, and obviously regarded Charles as Providence's substitute for her husband. Cunningly manipulating a web of trust funds and residuary legacies, she ruthlessly eliminated both Charles' wives (the second committed suicide in a Venetian gondola, the first eloped with Charles' analyst), and then herself died in circumstances of some mystery at the summer house at Lagoon West.

DESPITE the immense publicity attached to the Van Stratten family, little was ever known about the old dowager's death—officially she tripped over a second-floor balcony—and Charles retired completely from the limelight of international celebrity for the next five years. Now and then he would emerge briefly at the Venice Biennale, or serve as co-sponsor of some cultural foundation, but otherwise he retreated into the vacuum left by his mother's death. Rumor had it—at least in Ciraquito—that Charles himself had been responsible for her quietus, as if revenging (how long overdue!) the tragedy of Oedipus, when the dowager, scenting the prospect of a third liaison, had descended like Jocasta upon Lagoon West and caught Charles and his paramour *in flagrante*.

Much as I liked the story, the first glimpse of Charles Van Stratten dispelled the possibility. Five years after his mother's death, Charles still behaved as if she were watching his every movement through tripod-mounted opera glasses on some distant balcony. His trim youthful figure was a little more portly, but his handsome aristocratic face, its strong jaw belied by an indefinable weakness around the mouth, seemed somehow daunted and indecisive, as if he lacked complete conviction in his own identity.

Shortly after the arrival in Ciraquito of Orpheus Productions, the property manager visited the cafes in the artists' quarter, canvassing for scene designers. Like most of the painters in Ciraquito and Vermilion Sands, I

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was passing through one of my longer creative pauses. I had stayed on in the town after the season ended, idling away the long empty afternoons under the awning at the Cafe Fresco, and was already showing symptoms of secondary beach fatigue—irreversible boredom and inertia. The prospect of actual work seemed almost a novelty.

"*Aphrodite '70,*" Raymond Mayo explained when he returned to our table after a curb-side discussion. "The whole thing reeks of integrity—they want local artists to paint the flats, large abstract designs for the desert backgrounds. They'll pay a dollar per square foot."

"That's rather mean," I commented.

"The property manager apologized, but Van Stratten is a millionaire—money means nothing to him. If it's any consolation, Raphael and Michelangelo were paid a smaller rate for the Sistine Chapel."

"Van Stratten has a bigger budget," Tony Sapphire reminded him. "Besides, the modern painter is a more complex type, his absolute integrity needs to be buttressed by substantial assurances. Is Paul a painter, in the tradition of Leonardo and Larry Rivers, or a cut-price dauber?"

Moodily we watched the distant figure of the property manager move from cafe to cafe.

"How many square feet do they want?" I asked.

"About a million," Raymond said.

LATER that afternoon, as we turned off the Red Beach road and were waved on past the guardhouse to Lagoon West, we could hear the sonic sculptures high among the reefs echoing and hooting to the cavalcade of cars speeding over the hills. Droves of startled rays scattered in the air like clouds of exploding soot, their frantic cries lost among the spires and reefs. Preoccupied by the prospect of our vast fees—I had hastily sworn in Tony and Raymond as my assistants—we barely noticed the strange landscape we were crossing, the great gargoyles of red basalt that uncoiled themselves into the air like the spires of demented cathedrals. From the Red Beach—Vermilion Sands highway the hills seemed permanently veiled by the sand-haze, and Lagoon West, although given a brief notoriety by the death of Mrs. Van Stratten, remained isolated and unknown. From the beach houses on the southern shore of the sand-lake two miles away, the distant terraces and tiered balconies of the summer house could just be seen across the fused sand, jutting into the cerise evening sky like a stack of dominoes. There was no access to the house along

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the beach. Quartz veins cut deep fissures into the surface, and reefs of ragged sandstone reared into the air like the rusting skeletons of forgotten ships.

The whole of Lagoon West was a continuous slide area. Periodically a soft boom would disturb the morning silence as one of the galleries of compacted sand, its intricate grottoes and exquisite carved colonnades like an inverted baroque palace, would suddenly dissolve and avalanche gently into the internal precipice below. Most years Charles Van Stratten was away in Europe, and the house was believed to be empty. The only sound the occupants of the beach villas would hear was the faint enigmatic music of the sonic sculptures carried across the lake by the thermal rollers as they played softly to each other in the darkness.

It was to this landscape, with its imperceptible transition between the real and the super-real, that Charles Van Stratten had brought the camera crews and location vans of Orpheus Productions Inc. As the Lincoln joined the column of cars moving slowly towards the summer house, we could see the great canvas hoardings, at least two hundred yards wide and thirty feet high, which a team of construction workers were erecting among the reefs a quarter of a mile from the house. Decorated with huge abstract symbols, these would serve as backdrops to the action, and form a fragmentary labyrinth winding in and out of the hills and dunes.

ONE of the large terraces below the summer house served as a parking lot, and we made our way through the unloading crews to where a group of men in crocodile-skin slacks and raffia shirts—then the *de rigueur* uniform of *avant-garde* film men—were gathered around a large, heavily jowled man like a perspiring bear who was holding a stack of script-boards under one arm and gesticulating wildly with the other. This was Orson Kanin, director of *Aphrodite '70* and co-owner with Charles Van Stratten of Orpheus Productions. Sometime *enfant terrible* of the futurist cinema, but now a portly barrel-stomached fifty, Kanin had made his reputation some twenty years earlier with *Blind Orpheus*, a neo-Freudian, horror-film version of the Greek legend. (According to Kanin's interpretation, Orpheus deliberately breaks the taboo and looks Eurydice in the face because he wants to be rid of her—and in a famous nightmare sequence which projects his unconscious loathing, he becomes increasingly aware of something cold and strange about his resurrected wife, finds that she is a disintegrating corpse!).

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As we joined the periphery of the group, a characteristic Kanin script conference was in full swing, a non-stop pantomime of dramatized incidents from the imaginary script, anecdotes, salary promises and bad puns, all delivered in a rich fruity baritone. Sitting on the balustrade beside Kanin was a handsome youthful man with a sensitive face whom I recognized to be Charles Van Stratten. Now and then, *sotto voce,* he would interject some comment that would be noted by one of the secretaries and incorporated in Kanin's monologue.

As the conference proceeded I gathered that they would begin to shoot the film in some three weeks time, and that it would be performed entirely without script. Kanin only seemed perturbed by the fact that no one had yet been found to play the Aphrodite of *Aphrodite '70,* but Charles Van Stratten interposed here to assure Kanin that he himself would provide the actress.

At this eyebrows were raised knowingly. "Of course," Raymon murmured. "*Droit de seigneur.* I wonder who the next Mrs. Van Stratten is?"

But Charles Van Stratton seemed unaware of these snide undertones. Catching sight of me, he excused himself and came over to us.

"Paul Golding?" He took my hand in a soft but warm grip. We had never met but I presumed he recognized me from the photographs in the art reviews. "Kanin told me you'd agreed to do the scenery. It's wonderfully encouraging." He spoke in a light, pleasant voice absolutely without affectation. "There's so much confusion here it's a relief to know that at least the scenic designs will be first-class." Before I could demur he took my arm and began to walk away along the terrace towards the hoardings in the distance. "Let's get some air. Kanin will keep this up for a couple of hours at least."

LEAVING Raymond and Tony, I followed him across the huge marble squares.

"Kanin keeps worrying about his leading actress," he went on. "Kanin always marries his latest protégé—he claims it's the only way he can make them respond fully to his direction, but I suspect there's an old-fashioned puritan lurking within the cavalier. This time he's going to be disappointed, though not by the actress, may I add. The Aphrodite I have in mind will outshine Milo's."

"The film sounds rather ambitious," I commented. "But I'm sure Kanin is equal to it."

"Of course he is. He's very nearly a genius, and that should

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be good enough." He paused for a moment, hands in the pockets of his dove grey suit, before translating himself like a chess-piece along a diagonal square. "It's a fascinating subject, you know. The title is misleading, a box-office concession, the film is really Kanin's final examination of the Orpheus legend. The whole question of the illusions which exist in any relationship to make it workable, and of the barriers we willingly accept to hide ourselves from each other. How much reality can we stand?"

We reached one of the huge hoardings that stretched away among the reefs. Jutting upwards from the spires and grottoes, it seemed to shut off half the sky, and already I felt the atmosphere of shifting illusion and reality that enclosed the whole of Lagoon West, the subtle displacement of time and space. The great hoardings seemed to be both barriers and corridors. Leading away radially from the house and breaking up the landscape, of which they revealed sudden unrelated glimpses, they introduced a curiously appealing element of uncertainty into the placid afternoon, an impression reinforced by the emptiness and enigmatic presence of the summer house.

RETURNING to Kanin's conference, we followed the edge of the terrace. Here the sand had drifted over the balustrade which divided the public sector of the grounds from the private. Looking up at the lines of balconies on the south face, I noticed someone standing in the shadows below one of the awnings.

Then something flickered brightly from the ground at my feet. Momentarily reflecting the full disc of the sun, like a polished node of sapphire or quartz, the light flashed among the dust, then seemed to dart sideways below the balustrade.

"My God, a scorpion!" I pointed to the insect crouching away from us, the red scythe of its tail beckoning slowly. I assumed that the thickened chitin of the headpiece was reflecting the light, and then saw that a small faceted stone had been set into the skull. As it edged forward into the light, the jewel burned in the sun like an incandescent crystal.

Charles Van Stratten stepped past me. Almost pushing me aside, he glanced towards the shuttered balconies. He feinted deftly with one foot at the scorpion, and before the insect could recover had stamped it into the dust.

"Right, Paul," he said in a firm voice. "I think your suggested designs are excellent. You've caught the spirit of the whole thing exactly, as I knew you would." Buttoning his jacket, he made off towards the film unit, barely

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pausing to scrape the damp husk of the crushed carapace from his shoe.

I caught up with him. "That scorpion was jewelled," I said. "There was a diamond, or zircon, inset in the head."

He waved impatiently and then took a pair of large sunglasses from his breast pocket. Masked, his face seemed harder and more autocratic, reminding me of our true relationship.

"An illusion, Paul," he said smoothly. "Some of the insects here are dangerous. You must be more careful." His point made, he relaxed and flashed me his most winning smile.

Rejoining Tony and Raymond, I watched Charles Van Stratten walk off through the technicians and stores staff. His stride was noticeably more purposive, and he brushed aside an assistant producer without bothering to turn his head.

"Well, Paul," Raymond greeted me expansively. "There's no script, no star, no film in the cameras, and no one has the faintest idea what he's supposed to be doing. But there are a million square feet of murals waiting to be painted. It all seems perfectly straightforward."

I looked back across the terrace to where we had seen the scorpion. "I suppose it is," I said.

Somewhere in the dust a jewel glittered brightly.

TWO days later I saw another of the jeweled insects.

Suppressing my doubts about Charles Van Stratten, I was busy preparing my designs for the hoardings. Although Raymond's first estimate of a million square feet was exaggerated—less than a tenth of this would be needed—the amount of work and materials required was substantial. In effect I was about to do nothing less than repaint the entire desert.

Each morning I went out to Lagoon West and worked among the reefs, adapting the designs to the contours and colors of the terrain. Most of the time I was alone in the hot sun. After the initial frenzy of activity Orpheus Productions had lost momentum. Kanin had gone off to a film festival at Red Beach, most of the assistant producers and writers had retired to the swimming pool at the Hotel Neptune in Vermilion Sands, and those who remained behind at Lagoon West were now sitting half asleep under the colored umbrellas erected around the mobile cocktail bar.

The only sign of movement was that of Charles Van Stratten, roving tirelessly in his white suit among the reefs and sand-spires. Now and then I would hear one of the sonic sculptures on the upper balconies of the summer house change its note, and turn to see him standing beside it. His

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sonic profile evoked a strange, soft sequence of chords, interweaved by sharper, almost plaintive notes that drifted away across the still afternoon air towards the labyrinth of great hoardings that now surrounded the summer house. All day he would wander among them, pacing out the perimeters and diagonals as if trying to square the circle of some private enigma, the director of a huge Wagnerian psycho-drama that would involve us all in its cathartic unfolding.

Shortly after noon, when an intense pall of yellow light lay over the desert, dissolving the colors in its glazed mantle, I sat down on the balustrade, waiting for the meridian to pass. The sand-lake shimmered in the thermal gradients like an immense pool of sluggish wax. A few yards away something flickered in the bright sand, a familiar sudden flare of light. Shielding my eyes, I found the source, the diminutive promethean bearer of this brilliant corona. The spider, a Black Widow, approached on its stilted awkward legs, a blaze of staccato signals pouring from its crown. Then it stopped and pivoted, revealing the large chiselled sapphire inset into its skull.

MORE points of light flickered. Within a moment the entire terrace sparkled with jewelled light. Quickly I counted a score of the insects—turquoised scorpions, a purple mantis with a giant topaz like a tiered crown, and more than a dozen spiders, pin-points of emerald and sapphire light lancing from their heads.

Above them, hidden in the shadows among the bougainvillea on her balcony, a tall white-faced figure in a blue gown watched.

I stepped over the balustrade, carefully avoiding the motionless insects. Separated from the remainder of the terrace by the west wing of the summer house, I had entered a new zone, where the bone-like pillars of the loggia, the glimmering surface of the sand-lake, and the jewelled insects enclosed me in a sudden empty limbo.

For a few moments I stood below the balcony from which the insects had emerged, still watched by this strange sybilline figure presiding over her private world. I felt that I had strayed across the margins of a dream, onto an internal landscape of the psyche projected upon the sun-filled terraces around me.

But before I could call to her, footsteps grated softly in the loggia. A dark-haired man of about fifty, with a closed, expressionless face, stood among the columns, his black suit neatly buttoned, looking down at me with the impassive, lustreless eyes of a funeral director.

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The shutters withdrew upon the balcony, and the jewelled insects returned from their foray. Surrounding me, their brilliant crowns glittered with diamond hardness.

EACH afternoon, as I returned from the reefs with my sketch pad, I would see the jewelled insects moving in the sunlight beside the lake, while their blue-robed mistress, the lonely, haunted Venus of Lagoon West, watched them from her balcony. Despite the frequency of her appearances, Charles Van Stratten made no attempt to explain her presence. His elaborate preparations for the filming of *Aphrodite '70* almost complete, he became more and more preoccupied.

An outline scenario had been agreed on. To my surprise the first scene was to be played on the lake terrace, and would take the form of a shadow ballet, for which I painted a series of screens to be moved about like chess-pieces. Each was about twelve feet high, a large canvas mounted on a wooden trestle, representing one of the zodiacal signs. Like the Kafkaesque protagonist of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* trapped in a labyrinthine nexus of tilting walls, the Orphic hero of *Aphrodite '70* would appear searching for his lost Eurydice among the shifting time stations.

So the screen game, which we were to play tirelessly on so many occasions, made its appearance. As I completed the last of the screens and watched a group of extras perform the first movements of the game under Charles Van Stratten's direction, I began to realize the extent to which we were all supporting players in a gigantic charade of Charles' devising.

Its real object soon became apparent.

The summer house was deserted when I drove out to Lagoon West the next weekend, an immense canopy of silence hanging over the lake and the surrounding hills. The twelve screens stood on the terrace above the beach, their vivid heraldic designs melting into blurred pools of turquoise and carmine which bled away in horizontal layers across the air. Someone had re-arranged the screens to form a narrow spiral corridor. As I straightened them, the train of a white gown disappeared with a startled flourish among the shadows within.

Guessing the probable identity of this nervous intruder, I stepped quietly into the corridor. I pushed back one of the screens, a large Scorpio in royal purple, and suddenly found myself in the center of the maze, little more than an arm's length from the strange figure I had seen on the

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balcony. For a moment she failed to notice me. Her exquisite white face, like a mask of Florentine marble, veined by a faint shadow of violet that seemed like a delicate interior rosework, was raised to the canopy of sunlight which cut across the upper edges of the screens. She wore a long full-trained beach robe, with a flared hood that enclosed her head like a protective bower. One of the jewelled insects nestled on a soft fold above her neck, its light winking in the dim blue shadows of a jade scarab hanging like a dagger between her breasts. There was a curious glacé immobility about her face, investing the white porcelain skin with an almost sepulchral quality, the soft down which covered it like grave's dust. The fine nose and chin, and long sinuous pillar of the neck, had a marked translucence, as if she had spent her entire life in the shadows far from any sunlight.

"Who—?" Startled, she stepped back, the insects scattering at her feet, winking on the floor like a jewelled carpet. She stared at me in surprise, drawing the hood of her gown around her face like an exotic flower withdrawing into its foliage, then, conscious of the protective circle of insects, lifted her chin and composed herself.

"Sorry to interrupt you," I said. "I didn't realize there was anyone here. I'm flattered that you like the screens."

THE autocratic chin lowered fractionally, her head, with its swirl of blue hair, emerging from the hood. "*You* painted these?" she confirmed. "I thought they were Dr. Gruber's. . . ." She broke off, tired or bored by the effort of translating her thoughts into speech.

"They're for Charles Van Stratten's film," I explained. "*Aphrodite '70*. The film about Orpheus he's making here." I added: "You must ask him to give you a part. You'd be a great adornment."

"A film?" Her voice cut across mine. "Listen. Are you sure they are for his film? It's important that I know—"

"Quite sure." Already I was beginning to find her dissociated personality extremely exhausting. She seemed to exist on several levels simultaneously. Talking to her was like walking across a floor composed of blocks of varying heights, an analogy reinforced by the squares of the terrace, into which her presence had let another random dimension. "They're going to film one of the scenes here. Of course," I volunteered when she greeted this news with a frown, "you're free to play with the screens. In fact, if you like, I'll paint some for you."

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"Will you?" From the speed of the response I could see that I had at last penetrated to the center of her attention. "Can you start today? Paint as many as you can, just like these, don't change the designs." She gazed around at the huge zodiacal symbols looming from the shadows like the insane murals painted in dust and blood on the walls of a Toltec funeral corridor. "They're wonderfully alive, sometimes I think they're even more real than Dr. Gruber. Though—" here she faltered "—I don't know how I'll pay you. You see, they don't give me any money." She smiled at me like an anxious child, then brightened suddenly. She knelt down and picked one of the jewelled scorpions from the floor. "Would you like one of these?" The huge flickering insect, with its brilliant ruby crown, tottered unsteadily on her white palm.

Footsteps approached, the firm rap of leather on marble. "They may be rehearsing today," I said. "Why don't you watch? I'll take you on a tour of the sets."

As I started to pull back the screens I felt the long fingers of her hand on my arm. A sudden mood of acute agitation had come over her.

"Relax," I said. "I'll tell them to go away. Don't worry, they won't spoil your game."

"No! Listen, please!" The insects scattered and darted as the outer circle of screens was pulled back. In a few seconds the whole world of illusion was dismantled and exposed to the hot sunlight.

Behind the Scorpio appeared the watchful face of the dark-suited man. A thin smile played like a snake on his lips.

"Ah, Miss Emerelda," he greeted her in a purring voice. I think you should come indoors. The afternoon heat is intense and you tire very easily."

THE insects retreated from his black patent shoes. Looking into his eyes, I caught a glimpse of deep reserves of patience, like that of an experienced nurse used to the fractious moods and uncertainties of a chronic invalid.

"Not now," Emerelda insisted. "I'll come in a few moments."

"I've just been describing the screens," I explained.

"So I gather, Mr. Golding," he rejoined evenly. "Miss Emerelda," he called.

For a moment they appeared to have reached deadlock. Emerelda, the jewelled insects at her feet, stood beside me, her hand on my arm, while her guardian waited, the same enigmatic smile on his thin lips. Then more footsteps approached, the remainder of the screens were pushed back and the plump well-talcumed figure of Charles Van Stratten appeared, his urbane voice raised in greeting.

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"What's this—a story conference?" he asked jocularly, then broke off when he saw Emerelda and her guardian. "Dr. Gruber? What's going—Emerelda, my dear?"

Smoothly, Dr. Gruber interjected. "Good afternoon, sir. Miss Garland is about to return to her room."

"Good, good," Charles exclaimed hurriedly. For the first time I had known him he seemed unsure of himself. He made a tentative approach to Emerelda, who was staring at him fixedly. They gazed at each other, and then Emerelda drew her robe around her and stepped quickly through the screens. Charles moved forward, uncertain whether to follow her, then gave up helplessly.

"Thank you, doctor," he muttered. There was a brief flash of patent leather heels, and Charles and I were alone among the screens. On the floor at our feet was a single jewelled mantis. Without thinking, Charles bent down to pick it up, but the insect snapped at him, and he withdrew his fingers with a wan smile, as if accepting the finality of Emerelda's departure.

Recognizing me with an effort, Charles pulled himself together. "Well, Paul, I'm glad you and Emerelda were getting on so well. I knew you'd make an excellent job of the screens."

WE walked out into the sunlight. After a pause he said: "That is Emerelda Garland, she's lived here since mother died. It was a tragic experience, Dr. Gruber thinks she may never recover."

"He's her doctor?"

Charles nodded. "One of the best psychiatrists I could find. For some reason Emerelda feels herself responsible for mother's death. She's refused to leave here."

I pointed to the screens. "Do you think they help?"

"Of course. Why do you suppose we're here at all?" He lowered his voice, although Lagoon West was deserted. "Don't tell Kanin yet, but you've just met the star of *Aphrodie '70*."

"What?" Incredulously, I stopped. "Emerelda? Do you mean that she's going to play —?"

"Eurydice." Charles nodded. "Who better?"

"But Charles, she's. . . ." I searched for a discreet term.

"That's exactly the point. Believe me, Paul,"—here Charles smiled at me with an expression of surprising canniness—"this film is not as abstract as Kanin thinks. In fact, it's sole purpose is therapeutic. You see, Emerelda was once a minor film actress, I'm convinced the camera crews and sets will help to carry her back to the past, to the period be-

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fore her appalling shock. It's the only way left, a sort of total psycho-drama. The choice of theme, the Orpheus legend and its associations, fit the situation exactly—I see myself as a latter-day Orpheus trying to rescue my Eurydice from Dr Gruber's hell." He smiled bleakly, as if aware of the slenderness of the analogy and its faint hopes. "Emerelda's withdrawn completely into her private world, spends all her time inlaying these insects with her jewels, with luck the screens will lead her out into the rest of this synthetic landscape. After all, if she knows that everything around her is unreal she'll cease to fear it."

"But can't you simply move her physically from Lagoon West?" I asked. "Perhaps Gruber is the wrong doctor for her. I can't understand why you've kept her here all these years."

"I haven't kept her, Paul," he said earnestly. "She's clung to this place and its nightmare memories. Now she even refuses to let me come near her."

We parted and he walked away among the deserted dunes. In the background the great hoardings I had designed shut out the distant reefs and mesas. Huge blocks of color had been sprayed onto the designs, superimposing a new landscape upon the desert. The geometric forms loomed and wavered in the haze, like the shifting symbols of a beckoning dream.

As I watched Charles disappear, I felt a sudden sense of pity for his subtle but curiously naive determination. Wondering whether to warn him of his almost certain failure, I rubbed the raw bruises on my arm. While she stared at him, Emerelda's fingers had clasped my arm with unmistakable fierceness, her sharp nails locked together like a clamp of daggers.

SO, each afternoon, we began to play the screen game, moving the zodiacal emblems to and fro across the terrace. As I sat on the balustrade and watched Emerelda Garland's first tentative approaches, I wondered how far all of us were becoming ensnared in the strange world of Charles Van Stratten, by the painted desert and the sculpture singing from the aerial terraces of the summer house, and the sand-reefs with the barbed mouths like the vents of some volcanic hell. Into all this Emerelda Garland had now emerged, like a beautiful but exquisitely nervous wraith flitting among the sunlit phantoms of a noon-time dream. First she would slip among the screens as they gathered below her balcony, then, hidden behind the large Virgo at their center, would move across the floor towards the lake, enclosed by the

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shifting pattern of screens, now and then revealed as a corridor opened and pivoted.

Once I left my seat beside Charles and joined the game. Gradually I maneuvered my screen, a small Sagittarius, into the center of the maze, there found Emerelda in a narrow shifting cubicle, swaying from side to side as if entranced by the rhythm of the game, the insects scattered at her feet. When I approached she clasped my hand for a moment and then ran away down a corridor, her gown falling loosely around her bare shoulders. Then, as the screens once more reached the summer house, she gathered her train in one hand and disappeared among the columns of the loggia.

Walking back to Charles, I found a small jewelled mantis nestling like a brooch on the lapel of my jacket, its crown of amethyst melting in the fading sunlight.

"She's coming out, Paul," Charles said. "Already she's accepted the screens, soon she'll be able to leave them." He frowned at the jewelled mantis on my palm. "A present from Emerelda. Rather two-edged, I think, those stings are lethal. Still, she's grateful to you, Paul, as I am. Now I know that only the artist can create an absolute reality. Perhaps you should paint a few more screens."

"Gladly, Charles, if you're sure that . . ."

But Charles merely nodded absently to himself and walked away towards the film crew.

DURING the next days I painted several new screens, duplicating the zodiacal emblems, so that each afternoon the game became progressively slower and more intricate, the thirty screens forming a huge multiple labyrinth. For a few minutes, at the climax of the game, I would find Emerelda in the dark center with the screens jostling and tilting around her, the sculpture on the roof hooting in the narrow interval of open sky.

"Why don't you join the game?" I asked Charles. After his earlier elation he was becoming impatient. Each evening as he drove back to Ciraquito the plume of dust behind his speeding Maserati would rise progressively higher into the pale air. He had lost interest in *Aphrodite '70*. Fortunately Kanin had found that the painted desert of Lagoon West could not be reproduced by any existing color process, and the film was now being shot from models in a rented studio at Red Beach. "Perhaps if Emerelda saw you in the maze. . . ."

"No, no." Charles shook his head categorically, then stood up and paced about. "Paul, I'm less sure of this now."

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Unknown to him, I had painted a dozen more screens and early that morning hidden them among the others on the terrace.

* * *

Three night later, tired of conducting my courtship of Emerelda Garland within a painted maze, I drove out to Lagoon West, climbing through the darkened hills whose contorted forms reared in the swinging headlamps like the smoke-clouds of some sunken hell. In the distance, beside the lake, the angular terraces of the summer house hung in the grey opaque air, as if suspended by invisible wires from the indigo clouds which stretched like velvet towards the few faint lights along the beach two miles away.

The sculptures on the upper balconies were almost silent, and I moved past them carefully, drawing only a few muted chords from them, the faint sounds carried from one statue to the next to the roof of the summer house and then lost on the midnight air.

From the loggia I looked down at the labyrinth of screens, and at the jewelled insects scattered across the terrace, sparkling on the dark marble like the reflection of a star-field.

I found Emerelda Garland among the screens, her white face an oval halo in the shadows, almost naked in a blue silk gown like a veil of moonlight. She was leaning against a huge Taurus with her pale arms outstretched at her sides, like Europa supplicant before the bull, the luminous specters of the zodiac guard surroudning her. Without moving her head, she watched me approach and take her hands. Her blue hair swirled in the dark wind as we moved through the screens and crossed the staircase into the summer house. The expression on her face, whose porcelain planes reflected the turquoise light of her eyes, was one of almost terrifying calm, as if she were moving through some inner dreamscape of the psyche with the confidence of a sleepwalker. My arm around her waist, I guided her up the steps to her suite, realizing that I was less her lover than the architect of her fantasies. For a moment the ambiguous nature of my role, and the questionable morality of abducting a beautiful but insane woman, made me hesitate.

We had reached the inner balcony which ringed the central hall of the summer house. Below us a large sonic sculpture emitted a tense nervous pulsing, as if roused from its midnight silence by my hesitant step.

"Wait!" I pulled Emerelda back from the next flight of stairs, rousing her from her self-hypnotic torpor. "Up there!"

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A SILENT figure in a dark suit stood at the rail outside the door of Emerelda's suite, the downward inclination of his head clearly perceptible.

"Oh, my God!" With both hands Emerelda clung tightly to my arm, her smooth face seized by a rictus of horror and anticipation. "She's there . . . for heaven's sake, Paul, take me—"

"It's Gruber!" I snapped. "Dr. Gruber! Emerelda!"

As we re-crossed the entrance the train of Emerelda's gown drew a discordant wail from the statue. In the moonlight the insects still flickered like a carpet of diamonds. There I held her shoulders, trying to revive her glazed, expressionless face.

"Emerelda! We'll leave here, take you away from Lagoon West and this insane place." I pointed to my car, parked by the beach among the dunes. "We'll go to Vermilion Sands or Red Beach, you'll be able to forget Dr. Gruber forever."

We hurried towards the car, Emerelda's gown gathering up the insects as we swept past them. Then I heard her short cry in the moonlight and she tore away from me. I stumbled among the flickering insects, from my knees saw her disappear into the screens.

For the next ten minutes, as I watched from the darkness by the beach, the jewelled insects slowly moved towards her across the terrace, their last light fading like a vanishing night-river.

I walked back to my car, and a quiet, white-suited figure appeared among the dunes and waited for me in the cool amber air, hands deep in his jacket pockets.

"You're a better painter than you know," Charles said when I took my seat behind the wheel. "On the last two nights she has made the same escape from me."

He stared reflectively from the window as we drove back to Ciraquito, the sculptures in the canyon keening behind us like banshees.

THE next afternoon, as I guessed, Charles Van Strattan at last played the screen game. He arrived shortly after the game had begun, walking through the throng of extras and camera men near the car park, hands still thrust deep into the pockets of his white suit as if his sudden appearance among the dunes the previous night and his present arrival were continuous in time. He stopped by the balustrade on the opposite side of the terrace, where I sat with Tony Sapphire and Raymond Mayo, and stared pensively at the slow shuttling movements of the game, his grey eyes hidden below their blonde brows.

By now there were so many

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screens in the game—over forty (I had secretly added more in an attempt to save Emerelda)—that most of the movement was confined to the center of the group, as if emphasizing the self-immolated nature of the ritual. What had begun as a pleasant divertimento, a picturesque introduction to *Aphrodite '70*, had degenerated into a macabre charade, transforming the terrace into the exercise area of a nightmare.

Discouraged or bored by the slowness of the game, one by one the extras taking part began to drop out, sitting down on the balustrade beside Charles. Eventually only Emrrelda was left—in my mind I could see her gliding in and out of the nexus of corridors, protected by the huge zodiacal deities I had painted—and now and then one of the screens in the center would tilt slightly.

"You've designed a wonderful trap for her, Paul," Raymond Mayo mused. "A cardboard asylum."

"It was Van Stratten's suggestion. We thought they might help her."

Somewhere, down by the beach, a sculpture had begun to play, and its high plaintive voice echoed over our heads in the bright air. Several of the older sculptures whose sonic cores had corroded had been broken up and left on the beach, where they had taken root again. Now and then, when the heat gradients roused them to life, they would emit a brief strangled music, fractured parodies of their former song.

"Paul!" Tony Sapphire pointed across the terrace. "What's going on? There's something—"

Fifty yards from us, Charles Van Stratten had stepped over the balustrade, and now stood out on one of the black marble squares, hands loosely at his sides, like a single chess-piece opposing the massed array of the screens. Everyone else had gone, and the three of us were now alone with Charles and the hidden occupant of the screens.

THE harsh song of the rogue sculpture still pierced the air. Two miles away, through the haze which partly obscured the distant shore, the beach houses jutted among the dunes, and the great fused surface of the lake, in which so many objects were embedded, seams of jade and obsidian, was like a huge segment of embalmed time, from which the music of the sculpture was a slowly expiring leak. The heat over the vermilion surface was like molten quartz, stirring sluggishly to reveal the distant mesas and reefs.

Suddenly the haze cleared abruptly, and the spires of the sand-reefs seemed to loom for-

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wards, their red barbs clawing towards us through the air. The light drove through the opaque surface of the lake, illuminating its fossilized veins, and the threnody of the dying sculpture lifted to a climax.

"Emerelda!"

As we stood up, roused by his shout, Charles Van Stratten was running across the terrace. "Emerelda!"

Before we could move he began to pull back the screens, toppling them backwards onto the ground. Within a few moments the terrace was a melée of tearing canvas and collapsing trestles, the huge emblems flung left and right out of his path like disintegrating floats at the end of a carnival.

Only when the original nucleus of half a dozen screens were left did he pause, hands on hips, his loose blonde hair catching the sunlight, panting on his swaying legs.

"Emerelda!" he shouted thickly.

Raymond turned to me. "Paul, stop him, for heaven's sake!"

Striding forward, Charles pulled back the last of the screens. We had a sudden glimpse of Emerelda Garland retreating from the inrush of harsh sunlight, her white gown flared around her like the broken wings of some enormous fabled bird. Then, with an explosive flash, a brilliant vortex of light erupted from the floor at Emerelda's feet, a cloud of jewelled spiders and scorpions spat through the air and engulfed Charles Van Stratten.

Hands raised helplessly to shield his head, he raced off across the terrace, the armada of jewelled insects pursuing him, spinning and diving onto his head. Just before he disappeared among the dunes by the beach, we saw him for a last terrifying moment, clawing helplessly at the jewelled helmet stitched into his face and shoulders. Then his voice rang out, a long sustained cry on the note of the dying sculptures, lost on the stinging flight of the insects.

WE found him among the sculptures, face downwards in the hot sand, the fabric of his white suit lacerated by a thousand punctures. Around him were scattered the jewels and crushed bodies of the insects he had killed, their knotted legs and mandibles like abstract ideograms in some futuristic myth, the sapphires and zircons dissolving in the light.

His red swollen hands were filled with the jewels. The cloud of insects returned to the summer house, where Dr. Gruber's black-suited figure was silhouetted against the sky, poised on the white ledge like some mina-

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tory bird of nightmare. The only sounds came from the sculptures, which had picked up Charles Van Stratten's last cry and incorporated it into their own self-requiem.

". . . *'She . . . killed'*. . . ." Raymond stopped, shaking his head in amazement. "Paul, can you hear them, the words are unmistakable."

Stepping through the metal barbs of the sculpture, I knelt beside Charles, watching as one of the jewelled scorpions crawled from below his chin and scuttled away across the sand.

"Not himself," I said. "What he was shouting was *'She killed—Mrs. Van Stratten.'* The old dowager, his mother. That's the real clue to this fantastic menage. Last night, when we saw Gruber by the rail outside her room—I realize now that was where the old harridan was standing when Emerelda pushed her. For years Charles kept her alone with her guilt here, probably afraid that he might be incriminated if the truth emerged—perhaps he was more responsible than we imagine. What he failed to realize was that Emerelda had lived so long with her guilt that she'd confused it with the person of Charles himself. Killing him was her only release—"

I broke off to find that Raymond and Tony had gone and were already half-way back to the terrace. There was the distant sound of raised voices as members of the film company approached, and whistles shrilled above the exhaust of cars.

As the bulky figure of Kanin came through the dunes, flanked by a trio of assistant producers, their incredulous faces gaping at the prostrate body, the voices of the sculptures faded for the last time, carrying with them into the depths of the fossil lake his final *cri de coeur*, the last plaintive echoes of the death-song of Charles Van Stratten.

* * *

A YEAR later, after Orpheus Productions had left Lagoon West and the scandal surrounding Charles' death had subsided, we drove out again to the summer house. It was one of those dull featureless afternoons when the desert is without lustre, the distant hills suddenly illuminated by brief flashes of light, and the great summer house seemed drab and lifeless. The servants and Dr. Gruber had left, and the whole estate was beginning to run down. Sand covered long stretches of the road-way, and the dunes rolled across the open terraces, toppling the sculptures. These were silent now, and the white sepulchral emptiness was only broken by the hidden presence of Emerelda Garland.

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We found the screens where they had been left, and on an impulse spent the first afternoon digging them out of the sand. Those that had rotted in the sunlight we burned in a pyre on the beach, and perhaps the ascending plumes of purple and carmine smoke first brought our presence to Emerelda. The next afternoon, as we played the screen game, I was conscious of her watching us, and saw a brief gleam of her blue gown among the shadows.

However, although we played each afternoon throughout the summer, she never joined us, despite the new screens I painted and added to the group. Only on the night I visited Lagoon West alone did she come down, but I could hear the voices of the sculptures calling again and fled at the sight of her white face.

By some acoustic freak, the dead sculptures along the beach had revived themselves, and once again I heard the faint haunted echoes by Charles Van Strattan's last cry before he was killed by the jewelled insects. All over the deserted summer house the low muted refrain was taken up by the statues, echoing through the long empty galleries and across the dark moonlit terraces, carried away to the open mouths of the sand-reefs, the last dark music of the painted night.

THE END

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the Wolf Woman

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

IN the terror-strewn, nightmarish, catalogue of horrors politely termed "supernatural literature", there exists a certain exulted aristocracy which rear pontifically in popularity among the brotherhood of the damned. The vampire is most certainly one of the chosen "possessed" and equally popular is the werewolf.

An entire body of literature on the werewolf has come into existence including scholarly treatises on the origin of the legend and evaluation of the various fictional works devoted to the theme. While vampire fiction has its supreme masterpiece, Dracula *by Bram Stoker which classically serves as the model and guidepost for that literary realm, werewolf lore also possesses a large group of contestants with Guy Endore's* The Werewolf of Paris *(1933) as the frontrunner.*

Endore's novel, like Dracula *places a male character in the role of cardinal supernatural villain. However, the female werewolf or "werewoman" has been the subject of enough tales in this category to make it a specialty in itself. The romantic aspects of a wolf woman are obvious in the many colorful paintings on pulp magazine covers of a crouching half-naked girl poised alluringly and malevolently at the head of a pack of understandably drooling wolves.*

The supreme masterpiece of this splinter group of the werewolf clan is unquestionably Clarence Housman's turn-of-the-century novel The Werewolf, *in which a wolf woman is chased for many miles by a Scandanavian set on avenging the death of his brother. In the entire body of weird literature, the description of this pursuit is unsurpassed for its drama, suspense and grim beauty.*

Oddly enough, The Wolf Woman *by H. Bedford-Jones is technically science fiction as it hypothesizes the beginning of the*

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Illustrator LUTJENS

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werewolf story and most particularly the aspect of it concerning the werewoman. The 10th in his acclaimed "Trumpets from Oblivion" series which ran in BLUE BOOK *during 1934 it adds another bright mark to the honor roll of werewolf literature, with its stress on realism set against the background of a highly romantic mythical occurance.*

The fascination which the werewolf legend still holds for modern readers and authors is evidenced by ingenious attempts to explain the transformation from human into wolf scientifically such as in There Shall Be No Darkness *by James Blish* (THRILLING WONDER STORIES, *April, 1950) and Jack Williamson's* Darker Than You Think (UNKNOWN WORLDS, *Dec., 1930). You will note that H. Bedford-Jones' effort is related to this school and bears a psychological affinity to the ingenious efforts of other literary in-groups, most specifically The Baker Street Irregulars with Sherlock Holmes, to dress fiction in the vestments of "truth."*

NORMAN FLETCHER phoned me one morning, Even though one may know Fletcher well, to get a call from so distinguished a scientist,—one of the great men of the earth,—is to get a thrill.

"Hello!" came his cheerful tones. "Have you a stenographer in your office?"

"Yes," I replied in some astonishment.

He chuckled. "Have you a particular young woman there named Stephens?"

"Oh! Sure. Why?"

"I have a letter from her."

"You have what?"

"I got a letter from her the other day, asking if I could reveal the origin of the werewolf myth. If you're not busy, will you bring her out this evening?"

"Of course!" I promised. "I've been meaning to get in touch with you. The Inventors' Club want to know whether you'll be good enough to give any more demonstrations—"

"No!" he barked, with an unwonted brusqueness. "Sorry; I've undertaken a lot of Government work and may leave for Washington soon. Besides, something's gone wrong with my apparatus. Apparently it's getting out of control; I'll explain tonight."

I hung up, thinking uneasily of the recent occasion when something had gone wrong with his infernal invention. Then I called Miss Stephens and she flushed

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when I told her of Fletcher's words.

"Perhaps it was terribly impertinent," she confessed. "But you had said so much about those experiments—and I did a thesis at college on the werewolf—and, well—"

"And all that remains is for you to drive out there with me tonight," I said cheerfully. "You'll have the last word—or the first word—on the werewolf subject."

She was demure enough as I ushered her into Norman Fletcher's laboratory that evening and performed the introductions; but her demure quality had solid subsurface foundations. In no time at all, she had Fletcher interested, for she knew her subject; everything that had been written about werewolves, or humans who took wolf form at night, was in her head.

"But where's your apparatus?" she exclaimed, looking around. "Working with ultrasonic and high-frequency waves, with electricity of all sorts—and nothing in sight!"

It is true that about this grim stonewalled laboratory was little to suggest the home of the most advanced electrical scientist in the country. Easy-chairs were grouped about his instrument-board, or controls; this, looking like the triple manual of an organ, gave forth a faint hum of tubes at heat, but seemed unconnected with any other apparatus.

FLETCHER settled himself before it and dimmed the room lights. To my displeasure, Miss Stephens accepted a cigarette and smoked with an air of enjoyment. She knows very well that I discourage cigarettes about the office, but she disregarded me entirely and seemed absorbed in Fletcher and his theories.

"Reduced to its essentials," Fletcher said, "the myth is that a person dons a girdle of wolf-skin and turns into a wolf, to prowl at night; a woman is usually the subject, and as a rule it makes a grisly and horrible story. It goes back to the earliest of the Greek writers, even back to the Assyrians, and the belief still lingers in Europe today."

"Yes," said Miss Stephens. "I have Vetlugin's book on the Russian legends about it."

"Oddly enough," pursued old Fletcher, "the werewolves of the Christian dispensation were usually beneficent creatures, even touching and pitiful. While attempting yesterday to discover the origin of the legend, I chanced upon the story I'm going to show you. It concerns St. Odo, abbot of Cluny."

That his singular genius actually brought back scenes and sounds of the past, that the tremendous power of his ultrasonic

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mechanism could recapture, by a sort of backward television, real incidents from across the ages, we already knew. There was much about his process, however, that he had never revealed to anyone.

"Then," I said, "the characters tonight will talk old French, I presume?"

"No," said Fletcher hurriedly, for already the yellowish light was beginning to play upon the stone wall facing us. "My apparatus is somehow out of kilter; it does unexpected things, I regret to say, and I've no time to work on it now. Something about those new tubes and the iridium I've been using."

"What's that got to do with the language employed?" I asked.

"Everything. I can now get the sound alone, or the scenes alone. Yesterday I made a recording of the sound on this story and rushed it up to the university. Professor Hartmetz translated it into English and had the words recorded anew, rushed it back to me by dinnertime tonight, and I now switch the recording in on my sound-track. Ah! Pardon me."

A telephone was buzzing insistently. He reached out to the instrument and spoke. I watched the yellowish light dissolving the stones of the wall; the solid granite melted and began to disappear before our eyes. Suddenly Fletcher's voice sounded sharply.

"What?" he ejaculated. "What's that, Hartmetz? A horrible thing? Impossible! It was a lovely story, about St. Odo and the wolves—what? It was not?" Agitation suddenly thrilled in his tones. "Good Lord, man! Then there must be something wrong! Well, let it go. Thanks for calling me. I've got the thing on now. Good night."

I vaguely realized that something in his program had gone decidedly amiss; in the reflected radiance I saw him mop his brow and dart an anxious look at Miss Stephens, but she did not notice. She was staring at the wall. Those solid stones had now almost vanished, and as through a window, we were gazing out upon a scene that was no picture, but reality in every dimension. I caught a dazed mutter from Norman Fletcher.

"Sanscrit, he says—Sanscrit! The old Aryan race, thousands of years ago; no, no, it's impossible. . . ."

A woman's laughter drowned out the mutter.

THE scene before us blurred and moved, blurred and took shape anew—a vista of hills and forests, of squat, massive towers. Again everything blurred; the apparatus was certainly not functioning aright. The woman's

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laughter rose louder; it was no ringing musical peal of mirth, but the bitter laughter of hysteria. Suddenly the scene came clearly.

She was standing in a courtyard, laughing; a glorious figure against the background of rough stone and ancient thick trees, a woman laughing wildly, torn between grief and furious anger. The group of men regarded her with fear and awe. Her laughter died out and she put both hands to her face, as though to shut out some frightful vision.

This whole scene conveyed an impression of indescribable savage majesty; one sensed it, felt it in every detail. In this place was no delicacy or grace. The courtyard, the walls and buildings, were of enormous ill-fitted stone blocks; the trees were nobly massive; an air of spacious power pervaded everything, as in some dwelling of the gods.

The very doors, the stone seat, the beam-ends under the eaves, were gigantic and heavy-hewed. The weapons of the men bulked crudely large; spears with great bronze blades, huge splay-bladed axes of bronze, swords like beams of metal. The men themselves were built to match—figures of muscled strength and power. Outstretched at the woman's feet, red tongue lolling was a tamed wolf of tremendous size, eyeing her sharply.

The woman lifted her head and bared her face. She was in white, a golden torque about her neck. Her radiant loveliness struck forth like sun through dark clouds; it was a regal beauty, a richly glowing force instinct with energy. There was nothing passive about her. Into her stark blue eyes came a flame that shook her whole body, and her voice leaped forth like a clarion.

"Fight, Shatra! I'll lead, with you and the warriors following."

"Very well, but you know what it means, Indra," said the stalwart warrior, Shatra. "You know how they kill us; all day long we slay the little dark men, and at the end when we're exhausted, they overwhelm us. They're in countless numbers like ants. That's how your husband the king died; that's how most of our warriors have died. We are few, and they are like the forest leaves. Barbarians, rude and uncouth and swart—but they fight!

"That," he went on sadly, "is how our Aryan people have vanished. They slew in vain, and were overwhelmed. They drifted away and migrated, their civilization is lost; these little dark men have swarmed over the whole land. We alone remain, and now it is our time to die, if so you command."

THE flame died from Indra's face.

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"You have sworn to obey me and my son to the death," she said quietly.

"Our oaths stand; order it, and we fight and die—you and your son with us."

She caught her breath. "I see, I see! What are their terms?"

"They will not attack; behind our walls we can stand and laugh at them, killing them as they come. Their king gives a choice. Go forth freely and migrate, unharmed, seek another land as most of our people have done. Or else remain here in our stronghold; they'll send us what we need of food, but every man of us who leaves the walls, will be slain; women and children taken for slaves. We are the last of our people, Indra; the choice is yours to make and we abide by it."

She listened, wide-eyed. "Clever, these people! Let us remain here—and any who go forth, die! They're not anxious for any fight to the death. Come."

She beckoned imperiously and started across the courtyard. They followed her, mounting by the stairs to the stone tower over the gateway.

This was the donjon or central keep, the palace quarters of the dead king of a vanished people. From the squat tower, Indra could look down into the courtyard of the crudely massive castle itself, whose walls stretched afar over the hill. Within these walls was a small town. Outside was a vast camp stretching afar by hill and forest. And, from this camp, a score of the besiegers had come into the great courtyard of the castle, and waited there.

Indra looked at them. Hardy, swarthy men, different from her own people; smaller in stature, armed only with sword and bow. No stalwart hunters, like her powerful race, but numberless as the sea sands in that vast camp, an ocean of men who had flooded down over the snowy peaks and had driven her people out of their land. Small men, these Dravidians, yet they had conquered the mighty Aryan people and driven them into migration and exile afar.

"Perhaps it were better to go, like the rest," she murmured.

"We could take nothing, Indra," said one of her chiefs. "We must leave all arms and all treasure."

Her lips firmed. Her eyes flashed.

"No, then!" she exclaimed. "No! Keep our arms and our city; we, the last of our race!"

The chieftains assented and went to tell the Dravidian envoys. Indra, looking out upon the hills, perceive the deep cunning of these small people.

On the hills and slopes all about the town and castle, were palaces and chateaux. The Aryan

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princes and nobles had used these, for coolness in summer, for hunting in the winter; now the Dravidians occupied them, and the owners were dead. She perceived that the swarthy warriors thus held the place in a cordon. Their main host could go its ways and they would wait, grimly.

The summer had ended, autumn was whistling over the mountains, the first snow would fall any day now. Indra lifted unseeing eyes to the southward. There, over the vast lands that stretched to the sea and the ends of earth, the dark people had moved in. The Aryans had gone, scattered in migration after migration to the west and north, over the horizon to destiny unknown. Here among the mountains were the final remnant.

HER husband had fallen, the princes and great men had fallen. They had slain until they were borne down by sheer weight of numbers, like a man defying the tide to cover him. She, and the last of her people, and the boy who should some day be a king—her son; these were left. A king? Over what? There was no longer a kingdom. There would be no more a people over which he could rule, when he reached manhood.

An old councilor came and pointed to the courtyard below.

"Come, Lady Indra! The king of these people comes; you must meet him before the gates and swear the oath."

"Eh? What oath?"

"To observe the treaty; that none of our people shall war against his or leave these walls. Otherwise they die. He swears to let provisions enter freely, even to supply them, and to carry no fight to us. A great oath, with all the gods to witness!"

It was so accomplished before the gates, in sight of all men, and with sacrifices to the gods. This King Savastri drew the eye of Indra. He was a man of thirty, proud of eye and bearded, very active and light on his feet despite his armor; his features held a certain humor, and men said he was merry and as a warrior unequaled. He was grave today, however, and Indra thought his dark eyes were hungry as he looked upon her.

So she swore that she would permit none of her people to make war or leave the castle. And he to his own oaths, and the people and the host bearing witness. It was published that anyone leaving the castle might be slain by the dark folk, without redress.

"Leave now, if ye like—your whole people!" said King Savastri, white teeth flashing in a laugh. "Leave, and die! The quicker it's done, the sooner we'll have your women."

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His eye touched upon Indra as he spoke, but she turned away in contempt and made no reply to the taunt. Thus was the doom of the last Aryans sealed. They obeyed Indra to the letter, as they had sworn to do. Being a fierce people, they might have preferred to sally forth and die fighting, but she thought of the boy, and decided to temporize; so they obeyed, though it meant slow death for them all, cut away from the whole world.

But Indra sat in the great courtyard as the days passed, with the huge tamed wolf, Vic, at her feet; and her blue eyes flamed as reports came to her. The Dravidian host had flowed away over the hills like an ocean wave. Plenty of them remained; their leaders dwelt in the little castles and chateaux, the dark folk made villages around each one, and their king, Savastri, occupied the massive hunting-lodge built by Indra's husband, three miles away. From here, he ruled his dark people, who had taken over the whole land. The autumn rains came down, and the first touches of snow, but little frost as yet.

It was said that everywhere in the country the civilization of the Aryan people was lost and ruined, for these Dravidians were an uncouth and ignorant race.

Indra listened to all and said little, toying now with the boy, now with the wolf. The prince was a child of four; he and the wolf were friends. A grim and fierce thing was Vic, trained to obey Indra and to defend her; the greatest of wolves, he had been captured as a pup and tamed, but his heart was savage. So large was he that the boy Shiva rode about on his back, though this did not please Vic overmuch.

On the afternoon of the first snow, with a gale sweeping over the hills and forests, Indra sent for her old councilor Ran, and for the chief warrior who remained, the stalwart Shatra. To the latter, she spoke briefly.

"Tell whatever officer commands the guard at the little postern gate in the east wall tonight, that he is to let me go out and watch for my return, without question."

"You, Indra?" exclaimed the warrior, astonished. "Who accompanies you?"

"Vic," she said. At his name, the wolf lifted head and eyed her, unwinking.

UPON Shatra fell fear and dismay.

"Lady, think twice!" he said. "In the whole country, none of our people remain except women who are enslaved. If you're found abroad and taken or killed—"

"Prince Shiva will then be in your care," she said, and dismissed him. When he had gone,

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she turned to the old councilor.

"Would you break the oaths you swore to the gods?" he demanded, eyeing her keenly.

"I swore much for my people; nothing for myself," she said, and this was true. "I alone can make war upon these dark folk; I alone can avenge my dead husband and our lost cities and country, our scattered people. I know secrets none other lives to know, and ways of doing this. Let's have no argument, Ran. Are they sending us cattle tomorrow?"

"It was so promised," said Ran. "A hundred head."

"Good. See to it, then, that those who bring the cattle, are told a certain story they may carry back with them: The story you used to tell me, about our ancestors who changed their shape at night and became ravening wolves."

"As ordered, I will obey," said the old man. "But what drives you to such extremes of vengeance and hatred? Why cannot you live like the rest of us—"

"Live until you die behind walls, or go forth to be killed?" she said in disdain. "If you must know, I shall bring about the death of that man who rules them."

"So?" Old Ran fingered his white beard. "Because of his look and his words, when the oath was sworn—eh? I hear he is better than his nobles and leaders; in fact, a wise ruler, a king with brains—"

Indra flushed. "A king who shall taste the vengeance of the conquered! See that the story is told them. I intend to make that man Savastri suffer before he dies. No other can kill him, but I can. The wind howling upon the thick trees howls death this night!"

"He lives in the castle your husband built, with guards and warriors—"

"And I, who helped build that castle, know its secrets," she said, smiling terribly.

Indra, who came of a warrior race, could use sword or spear better than most men.

THAT night, respecting her signet ring, though they could not see her face, the guards at the little east gate let her out. She was clad in a robe of wolfskins, and the head was drawn over her head after the manner of hunters, with a flap down to conceal her face. She carried a hunting-spear, and the huge wolf Vic was at her heels. They saw her vanish into the trees where the storm tossed and the first snowflakes were drifting and sifting; and so closed the gate again, looking one at another with affrighted eyes.

Toward lawn, her voice summoned them, and the throaty

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howl of Vic. A torch was brought, and recognizing her, they let her in, but not as she had gone. Red was her spear, and the cruel jaws of Vic slavered blood.

"Do no talking," she ordered the guards, and went her way.

With morning, Dravidian warriors drove cattle into the great castle, as promised, and told a strange tale. Wolves had broken into the king's lodge, none knew how; one of their princes, and two of the bodyguard of the king, had been slain. The wolves had vanished again.

These men were told the legends of the royal house, and how certain of its princes could take the shape of wolves, at will. Undoubtedly, the ghost of the dead king had acted thus, taking vengeance upon his conquerors. With this cold comfort, the Dravidians were sent whence they had come.

Three days later, King Savastri and six of his chieftains came demanding speech with Indra. She had them brought up to the courtyard of the keep, and sent Vic away to the kennel he occupied; he was licking his jaws and his fur, this frosty morning.

Word spread that there had been more killing in the king's lodge, last night. Indra appeared, with Ran and others of the council behind her, and greeted the king. He saluted her, his bold eager eyes never leaving her face.

"Lady, there is peace between my people and yours, for so you have chosen," he said abruptly. "We have kept the peace; but your people have come upon us in the night, slaying."

"That is untrue," Indra replied, and beckoned Ran. "Go and discover if any man left the gates last night or yesterday. If so, he shall die here and now for disobedience."

The old man departed, and she looked again at Savastri, unsmiling and serene.

"You are no liar," he said impulsively.

"I am no liar," she rejoined. "Now tell me what has happened."

"This is the second time," he said, while his chieftains assented. "Last night two of my captains were slain—mangled as though by wolves. A guard thought he saw a wolf-shape slinking through the rooms. Evidently your people are doing this."

"If so, they shall die; I swear it," she rejoined. "Is it possible you don't know the legends of our royal house? The ghosts of the dead are visiting you, great king; the ghost of my husband, whom your warriors slew, takes a wolf-shape in the night and kills. This is the old story, for my

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people are hunters and forest people."

"I have heard some such story being noised abroad," said Savastri. "All nonsense! One of those captains was killed with a spear, last night. Wolves don't use spears."

SO?" She regarded him steadily, a cool smile of contempt in her eyes. "Great king, let me advise you to change your dwelling. Seek safety elsewhere. Let your warriors occupy the royal lodge and risk the vengeance of dead men; you can hide safely in another place."

The cool mockery of her words was bitter to bear, and Savastri flushed.

"I'm not that sort, lady. By the god Shiva! I'll lay that ghost, if ghost it be!"

"Shiva?" She started slightly. "Who is he?"

"One of our gods."

"Aye? It's the name of my son—there he is, now."

The boy appeared crossing the courtyard. Savastri and his chiefs regarded him, and their stern dark faces changed and lightened with swift admiration. The boy was like a radiant sunbeam. Savastri turned quickly to Indra.

"Lady, marry me!" he said abruptly. "Marry me, and your people shall go free!"

Her eyes chilled. "When I marry you, barbarian, it will only be upon the couch of death!"

So barbed with disdain were her words that the Dravidian chieftains growled angrily, but Savastri only looked into her face and a smile leaped in his quick eyes.

"You'll be worth the having," said he. Before her fury could find response, old Ran came back and made report.

No man had left the city or passed the walls since the peace had been sworn.

"My warriors are not liars," said Indra. "Further, King Savastri, I swear that if any man leaves the city, I'll inform you of it; if any of my people undertake any action against your people, they break my oath and their own, and shall die. Go back, and hide from the ghosts of the dead!"

There the matter ended, and she had the last word; but something in the way she said it drew a speculative, searching look from Savastri. Perhaps he suspected her from this moment.

When she heard the talk of her council and leaders, however, she went white with fury. To all of them it seemed that Savastri was the kingliest of men, and wise withal. That same night she went from the little postern gate with Vic, and returned long ere dawn; word came next day that four Dravidian chiefs, drinking together at an outpost, had been

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slain by a wolf—who left human tracks in the snow.

"My husband," said Indra to old Ran, "is having company on the ghost-path!"

"What good will it do you, or your people?" he asked.

Her face clouded.

"I don't know—yet. Only one thing matters to me, Ran; one person. Somehow, I shall assure his future; I shall find some way!"

"Prince Shiva was born to be a king, true," said Ran, scratching his white beard. "But the Aryan people have gone forth across the world, vanishing as a cloud in the sky; they are gone. They may found other empires afar, other races and peoples may spring from them, but they are gone. And we who remain here are doomed. Better a swineherd in safety, than a king without a kingdom or a people!"

Her blue eyes flashed. "King's blood will have king's name," said she curtly. "Three nights from now, my husband will be avenged."

Old Ran looked after her as she departed, and wagged his head sagely.

"A husband under the ground is best left there," he grumbled, "as many a woman has found to her cost ere this."

THREE days passed swiftly; evening of the third day brought snow blowing through the forest trees and a keen wind whistling over the roof of the world. In this bitter night, only a beast could find his way abroad.

"Take the track, Vic," said Indra, when the gate clanged shut behind them. Obedient to her word, knowing her voice and speech, the wolf trotted ahead as she released him.

She followed close, muffled in her wolfskins, with furred leggings, the huntingspear in her hand. The snow now falling thicker, swirled about them, but the big wolf kept straight on, well knowing what way they went. They came at last to a thicket of trees; half a bowshot distant was the king's lodge, where a flaring cresset flickered in the storm.

Among the trees, they approached the building still more closely. Vic halted, beside a jagged rock that was rapidly piling high with snow. Indra put out her hand to it, and the mass of rock slid smoothly. Into an opening thus revealed Vic darted, but Indra called him back to heel. He obeyed, with a whine of repressed eagerness; the killer was aroused.

She passed down steps, along a tunnel, and to steps again; mounting these rapidly in the pitch blackness, she paused at a tiny gleam of light. She was now

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in the king's lodge, by a secret passage installed for emergencies; the others who knew of it, were dead.

She touched a panel and it slid aside, letting her look into the main room, where a huge fire was dying down on the hearth. The firelight showed a number of dim figures at the door; and a voice reached her, the voice of Savastri the king.

"No, no! I remain here with two guards, and the dogs. The rest of you, out to the huts and keep watch on the grounds! I'll have no woman taunting me, even if she were the most glorious woman on earth, with skulking in safety while my captains run risks. I remain here, to meet the man-wolf if it comes. You others, stand watch outside. Go!"

They went, grumbling and protesting. One of them made some laughing remark.

"Aye," replied the king, a curiously vibrant ring in his voice. "From my first sight of that woman, my heart went out to her. I'll have no other, I tell you! There's no other in the world her equal, no other for me, and that ends it. Goodnight!"

Indra, listening, caught her breath in quick anger. Vic began a growl; she reached down and silenced him with a touch and a word, then looked into the room.

"The dogs are uneasy, they smell something," said a voice. She saw a guard, and two large wolfhounds, though they were somewhat smaller than Vic.

"That may be," said the king. "Both of you take the outer room, with the dogs. I'll sleep in the room beyond. Keep a light burning in your room."

An alabaster lamp was taken away, and the place was empty except for red fireglow.

Presently Indra put her weight upon the secret door, and it swung aside. About the neck of Vic was a heavy collar of wolfskin like his own; she gripped it, and he emerged with her into the dimly lit chamber.

She did not hesitate. She was alone in the lodge with three men; two of them, and the dogs, must be killed before she could kill Savastri as she intended. She knew where lay the rooms in question; and, since she disdained to attack sleeping men, she went straight to them now—two sleeping-rooms at the end of the hall.

As she neared them, she halted, crouching. The door of the first was somewhat ajar, a light shone across the hall, a man spoke.

"I tell you, the dogs smell something—look at them! Bring the light. Let's take a turn around the place. I'll take the dogs on leash."

The dogs growled and whined;

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Vic's fur lifted under her hand, a savage throaty sound came from him. One of the men came out, bearing the lamp. He checked himself and put it on a stand.

"Forgot my bow," he said. "Go ahead. I'll come with the lamp."

He withdrew. The other came out, the two dogs straining on leash. They gave sudden wild tongue, sensing the presence of Vic. Indra knew it was the moment.

"Take them, Vic!" she said, and loosed him.

The great shape went hurtling for the dogs. From the guard burst a terrible cry; he frantically loosed his dogs. He had held them an instant too long. Vic was into them with the kill-growl, murderous jaws slashing too fast for eye to follow. The three shapes mingled into one—a shapeless scramble of ferocity, from which flew fur and bright drops of blood.

Indra was darting forward. The guard, long sword sweeping out, struck at the battling animals. One dog was dead, the other down. The guard sighted Indra's figure, and slashed at her as he swung around. Her spear went through him, and she tugged it free as he fell. The second dog was quivering in death and Vic was up and whirling, with fiery eyes and blood-slavering muzzle.

OUT into the open came stumbling the second guard, bow bent and shaft notched. Seeing Indra, he started back. Vic went for him, and his bowstring twanged; he snatched a second shaft and shot. Both arrows thudded through the throat of the gaunt wolf, through throat to brain. The wolf's rush, however, took him at the man, leaping even as he died—leaping and slashing with cruel teeth. The guard was borne backward, and the teeth of the dying beast ripped open his throat and chest.

"Vic! *Vic!*"

A sharp cry, as Indra darted forward. She knelt in the pool of blood. The head of the wolf lifted slightly. His eyes rolled upon her in the lamplight; then his head fell and his eyes rolled no more. He was dead. Silence, and the gusty odor of hot blood, settled upon the place.

"So men and beasts keep company down the path of ghosts!" said a voice, amused, calm, poised: the voice of King Savastri.

Indra was up, spear ready—up and flinging forward. Savastri stood in the doorway, a dagger in his left hand, a long coiled whip in his right. He wore a crimson robe and was bareheaded.

She was at him like a flash of fury. The spear drove straight for his heart, a death-blow; but

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it slid away from armor beneath the robe. Across her face, half masked by the flap of wolfskin, lashed the heavy whip. Blinded, she staggered but struck again with the spear. The whip coiled about the weapon and jerked it out of her hand. The spear fell with a clatter. The lash burned across her arms and body, burned again. Savastri was striking with cool, deliberate intent, but striking swiftly.

A scream burst from her. She threw herself upon him with savage ferocity. He evaded her spring, caught the wolfhead above her head, and tore it away. The fair glory of her golden hair burst forth; and the loaded whip-butt thudded down.

She crumpled without a word and lay in a huddled, inert heap.

"So!" said King Savastri, gazing at her face. "I suspected as much. Ha! Now to see where she and the beast came from."

He caught up the lamp, picked his way across the blood-spattered floor, and in the main room found the secret door ajar.

Going back quickly, he dragged the great body of Vic down the hall and to that secret door; even for his sinewy strength, it was no light task. He cut the collar from the dead wolf's neck and kept it. The beast's carcass he shoved into the hidden passage, and closed the door again.

Returning to the frightful scene of death, he picked up Indra and carried her into the farther room; she was breathing heavily, and would be unconscious a long while.

PRESENTLY King Savastri opened the door of the lodge and blew a blast on his horn. Guards came running; picking out some of the captains, he took them with him to the grisly hall, and showed them what had happened.

"The wolf came, and the wolf went," said he, showing them the collar. "You see this? Now come, and see who wore it. The stories that we heard were true."

He took them into the farther room. There upon the bed lay Indra, senseless; now she was clad in a long white robe that Savastri had put upon her, after hiding the wolfskins. He beckoned his staring captains outside and closed the door.

"Here is the girdle." He gave it to one of them. "Throw it into the fire; she will never again be able to play wolf. Rather, she remains queen!"

* * *

INDRA opened her eyes to daylight and snow drifting in at the window. She lay in her own bed, in what had been her room in the royal lodge, and warm skins covered her. At her side sat King Savastri; he had been

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bathing her bruised head and face with a wet cloth. Now he leaned back, regarding her.

She stared at him. With a rush, memory returned; yet she was held spellbound by finding herself here and thus. She tried to speak, and could not. He smiled, leaned forward, and touched her forehead with the cloth again; his fingers were deft and very gentle.

"Apparently you had a bad dream," he said casually. "You have been talking about wolves ever since my guards found you wandering among the trees."

Her eyes dilated upon him. "Wolves?" she whispered. "Wandering? You devil! What jest is this? You know well—"

"Be quiet," broke in the king. "Be quiet and let me speak, for a little space. Here; if this will make you feel better, play with it," and he thrust a long dagger into her hand, then came to his feet and went to the window-opening.

She gripped the dagger and watched him, a flame in her eyes.

"Whatever you may think," said the king calmly, "you were picked up among the trees and brought here, by my guards. How you came there, how you left your castle, does not matter. If you're tempted to remember anything else, dear lady, it was all an evil dream. Let it be forgotten. I'm glad you're here, for I've something to say to you."

She lay like a trapped beast, wary and tense.

HE came toward her, smiling. "Indra, these people of mine are a crude, savage lot of barbarians; I'm one myself. But I have sense enough to know that all the civilization, all the fine things, of your Aryan race are perishing in the hands of my people; this whole glorious land of yours is going back to the jungle. I want to save it. You can save it. You esteem it an insult if I speak of loving you, of wedding you because you're the only woman I know who is fit to be a queen, and my wife. But there's another reason. Our people, and your son—Prince Shiva."

The name drove into her, quieted her, held her intent upon him.

"Marry me," he went on in that calm voice. "Let your people mingle with my people, let them keep all they have and more, let them teach my people your Vedic Hymns, your gods, your ways of life and art and work. The remnant of your people can grow great again, among mine; they may be a sect, a caste, apart. A superior caste, not slaves!

"I have no sons to follow me, Indra," he went on. "But with you for wife, I'd have a son, and

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one whom my people would worship and revere. Your boy; let me adopt him, as the future king of this people. It was not I who slew his father, but one of my captains whom your wolf killed."

"My wolf!" Her eyes widened upon him, her voice came with a catch. "Ah! Then your sorry jest is ended!"

"By the gods, I'm not jesting!" Suddenly impetuous, he came swiftly to the bed and looked down at her, and he was all ablaze. "You're no liar, Indra; you swore oaths for your people, but there was no mention of yourself in them. That gave me the clue. And what was it you said—that you would marry me only upon the couch of death? Well, you're lying upon it now; death for you and your son and your whole people, if you make that choice."

HE dropped on the edge of the bed beside her, and threw out his hands.

"You have the knife; use it!" he said, hoarsely earnest. "The choice is yours. Here is my throat; kill me, if you like, if that will satisfy you! For I worship you, Indra; I worship you with my whole heart. I offer you myself, to kill or to take. . . .

"And with myself, your son's life," he went on swiftly, seeing her hand move and the knife flash. "Instead of death and ignominy, he shall have honor and a crown. Your people shall have life instead of death; this nation shall rise again—if you so choose! I offer a glorious future, worthy of you, and the name of Prince Shiva shall be enshrined among our gods. But kill me if you so desire. There is no one to interfere."

With one hand, he drew the edge of his robe over his face, and waited.

The silence of the room was stirred only by the rustle of the wintry branches outside. He could hear her quick, hard breathing, but no word came from her. Suddenly she moved and caught her breath, as though to plunge the knife into him; but he did not stir.

The knife clattered on the floor. Her hand touched his.

* * *

The scene blurred and vanished. The stone wall came back into sight, the yellow light died away, the room-lights flickered on. Norman Fletcher turned to us, awe and amazement in his eyes.

"I'll be hanged!" he broke out. "This isn't what I expected to show you at all. It's not the same thing. This apparatus is playing tricks! But, my word! Did you get the meaning of what we just saw—the allusions to historic and ethnologic fact?"

"Rather!" Miss Stephens nod-

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ded, a tinge of excitement in her cheeks. "A scene from the dispersal of the great Aryan race, somewhere on the uplands of Asia, back before history began! And the legend of the werewolf, which curiously enough seems to be a purely Aryan legend, a sort of race-myth!"

Fletcher stared at her.

"Well, it might have been worse," he said slowly. "I see now why Hartmetz said the language was a form of Sanscrit. And damned bloody it was, too. I'm sorry you saw it", he added apologetically.

Miss Stephens tossed her head slightly. "Why?" she rejoined coolly. "If you ask me, I thought it was fascinating, positively fascinating! All of it."

When we were driving home, I asked what she had honestly thought about it.

"Oh!" she said in her demure way, which I now realized was not really demure at all, but rather blasé, "he didn't fool me for a minute. I think he was just trying to shock me."

"Really!" I said, not without sarcasm. "And did he succeed, Miss Stephens?"

"I'm afraid," she drawled, "that poor Mr. Fletcher is behind the times."

I let it go at that.

THE END

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KING SOLOMON'S RING

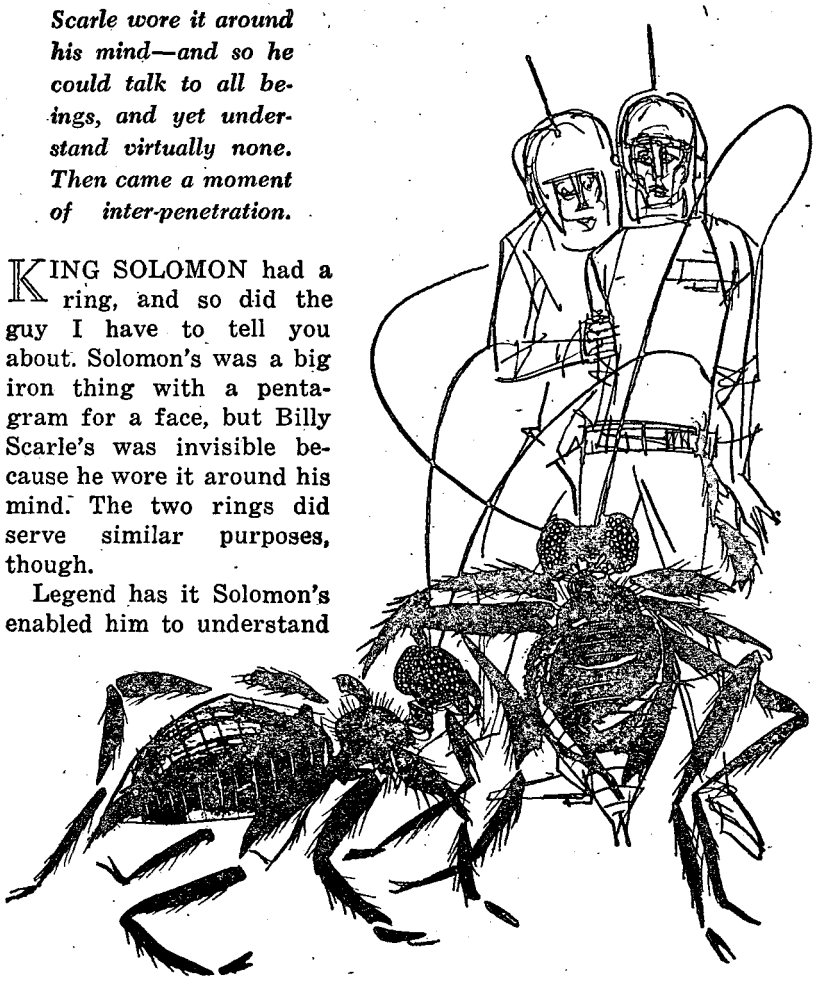
By ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrator BLAIR

Scarle wore it around his mind—and so he could talk to all beings, and yet understand virtually none. Then came a moment of inter-penetration.

KING SOLOMON had a ring, and so did the guy I have to tell you about. Solomon's was a big iron thing with a pentagram for a face, but Billy Scarle's was invisible because he wore it around his mind. The two rings did serve similar purposes, though.

Legend has it Solomon's enabled him to understand



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the language of beasts. Scarle, as you may remember, also had the gift of tongues. I suppose that was the reason for his peculiar susceptibilities.

I am writing this letter, Lisa, because you are the one who managed to recruit him and I think he was in love with you. Maybe I am wrong. If so, I can only ask pardon for the intrusion and trust to your sense of humor to put things in perspective.

Last night (I think it was last night) I was having dinner/s with Doctor Hale, whom you have never met. He is a big panda of a man—white boots (generally), wide black trousers (always), white shirt (always), black tie (ditto), and black on top (mostly). He has the feral eyes, too, and he listens to the world through a pair of puffed teacups (he used to be a light-heavyweight—a pretty good one); and he has a nose like the old Eiffel Tower, and bent, and he manages to get by with less couchside blather than other complex-pushers I've met. He claims his record as a therapeutic Svengali is based on the fact that his patients tend to feel sorry for him on first sight, but I sometimes wonder. Once he turns on that snow machine of his, his fat face sort of melts until it seems you are staring at a portrait of Machiavelli in retirement.

He is not retired, though, and he has a very professional manner with steaks . . .

Between mouthfuls: "What about Billy Scarle?"

"You're the doctor. You tell me."

"I value your opinion."

"In that case, you're losing your touch. I don't have one."

"Then manufacture one, because I want it."

I bit into a roll, buying myself thirty seconds' mulling time, and proceeded to mull.

SCARLE'S early career had been a success mainly because it was a minimum personnel operation. He did not trust too many people, so everyone aboard his ship was a close-mouthed specialist in many things. What puzzled the Guard for a long time was the fact that he was very unconventional in disposing of the fruits of his piracies. Dozens of the worlds on the Exploratory Perimeter are no more than encyclopedia entries followed by a couple sentences, but there are many excellent trading centers among them. Language is a genuine barrier, though, and there just *aren't* that many interpreters, especially for bootlegging operations.

What it took you a long time to figure out was something that Scarle was barely aware of him-

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self. He just thought he had mastered galactic sign language, and that the hybrid patois of Fenster, his home world, was sufficient to fill in the gaps. Bear in mind, Lisa, that while he was clever he was only nominally educated in a Slumschule, and was quite naive in many matters. Still, it took the Circle of Solomon to tip off the Guard as to what they were dealing with.

After his apprehension on Martin VIII, it was his ratty luck to be shipped Earthwards in the custody of an old Guardsman ready for retirement. As you know, the cop decided along the way that the arrest had been out of jurisdiction, and he also decided he did not want a black mark on his record at that stage in the game. So he changed a couple log entries and elected himself judge, jury, and executioner—as you may not know. He never said a word while he made the preparations, but of course Scarle *knew*.

I suppose it would be interesting to tell you the details of the cop's not being able to pull the trigger and Scarle's smashing him to pieces with his arm collars, but I'd rather not be that interesting. I've heard the story too many times.

When you picked him up in that bar on Kimberly he was beginning to suspect what he was, but he was too busy vacationing to do much experimenting. He was lying low and feeling high, and shopping around for a new rig, that night you sat down across from his whisky-and-flent and offered to tell his fortune.

Naturally he said "yes", because you are beautiful.

"The thirteenth card of the Major Arcana," you told him, "is the Boney Reaper. He signifies Death, often only on metaphysical levels, but a death, nevertheless. Your life is going to change."

And he smiled and agreed and asked if you wanted to help change it, and you smiled and agreed, sort of. It took about a week of his being puzzled (because he could not anticipate you the way he could other people), before you knew he was ready for The Bet. (*Did* you have that Tarot up your sleeve? He wondered that on several occasions, so I thought I would ask.) It was well managed, I gather, and of course the prediction turned out to be quite true.

For the wagered price of one cruiser he agreed to be your quarry. You managed to convince him that you were rich (which was also true, now I think of it) and looking for kicks (which might have held an incidental truth, at that). He could not back down, not that he wanted to, because he had boasted too much beforehand. And he

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did have a high survival potential also, as it was only by accident that I managed to kill him when I finally had to.

THREE days for him to hide himself in the jungles of Kimberly, and a week in which he had to stay hidden, despite your trackers, your mechanical spiders, and your electronic B.O. detectors, and he did it. I remember the night you told me about it. It was on Lilith, with a sky full of moons and a fine, tangy sea breeze assaulting the smells of roast Süssevogel and Lilithmosel (that pagan Liebfrauvmilch!)—Do you recall the name of the place? I seem to forget it now, but I remember the balcony quite vividly, and you were wearing something dark blue . . . Oh well.

It took three days to find his trail, you said, and six hours to close in on him. Then he escaped when you approached his campsite. This happened a couple times, until you had flushed him onto the higher ground near the Gila Range. Remember now? The spiders stopped coming back, and you started finding them smashed to bits until you were out of spiders. By then it became apparent that he was mounted, because he started moving very fast and the broken spiders showed hoofmarks. After the fifth day the trackers gave up, without admitting it, and the "dogs" grew interested in other matters.

At the end of the week he walked into your camp, all smiles, and aware of his power. He had won The Bet by destroying the mechanical hunters, circling around behind your party, and "eavesdropping" on your hunting beasts. Then he managed to "talk" them out of following him. He followed along behind you until the seven days were up, and then he walked in on you, clean-shaven, and thinking he had won. The poor sucker! He had been initiated into the most exclusive club in the galaxy and therewith reduced his life expectancy by ninety or a hundred years. Excuse me, dear, I'm not being bitter, but I liked the guy. If the Guard had gotten him to Earth alive he would have been recruited anyhow.

King Solomon had a ring, you told him—while you were on that month's frolic about Earth and the Inworlds—a ring that enabled him to understand all the tongues of life. And you, Billy Scarle, you also have a ring. You wear it around your mind like an introverted chastity belt, and whenever anything is going to speak you know what it is going to say before it says it, and whenever you want to say something, and want to strongly enough, others know what you are going

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to say before you say it. You are a fractional telepath and a potential paralinguist. You would probably flunk first semester French, which is an easy Ortho-tongue, but with the proper training you could be a two-way on-the-spot interpreter for any two languages without knowing either.

And he wanted to know if there was money in it! Do you remember him now? He was about five-ten, with that premature frost on his hair that comes of pushing poorly-shielded cruisers too far; nervous fingers, light eyes, a preference for nondescript clothing; and when he talked all his sentences seemed like one long word. At first glance, I guess he just did not give the impression of being much of a criminal. Rather, perhaps (and quite correctly), he seemed a person who would have had a hard time enjoying Mardi Gras time on Centuvo. Hale thinks this was the key to his talent, cast long ago on the streets of Fenster.

YOU offered him full Circleship, if he could pass the training, emphasizing its retroactive civil immunity as much as its high pay, so what else could he do? He realized you were his superior in nearly everything. He wanted to even things up, and his pride was always an amazing thing to behold—right up until the end it made him equal to almost any task. I remember how he sweated over Chomsky's book (which did not mean much in the long run, because the Thing Applied was all sedation and sound cycles), but it furnished him with broad concepts, and things like concepts help smooth down rough edges. And as for the law—well, he *did* want an out.

He joined and you kept in touch: beautiful, witty, sophisticated, what shall I say?—polemics?—until he drew his first assignment and went incommunicado. What then, Lisa?

"I'll tell you, Doc," I said to Hale, "I was thinking of his first assignment. It was to that world called Malmson. You weren't along that trip, which is too bad. He felt we wrecked the whole society there, and it sort of got to him. I think he felt more responsible for it than one man has a right to feel."

"For what? What happened?"

"Oh, nothing out and out crushing. We didn't hook the population with narcotics or send their females to brothels, as we've often been accused of doing. We couldn't have done much physical exploitation if we'd wanted to—they were all about three feet tall and looked sort of like kiwis with arms. But Scarle really didn't know what he was doing yet. He thought it was all

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setting up the hum box, taking a shot, and filling out the Omniform. Of course, it doesn't stop with that."

"And?"

"He found out, after the Omni was Staff Evaluated and Malmson's borox deposits were deemed significant. A report was submitted and we left. A year later he went back for a visit—they should never let a paraling revisit one of his X-worlds . . . The industry we were imposing had already begun disrupting the culture's value systems—and because Scarle was a paraling he translated feelings as well as words when he talked with the creatures that second time. The deposed grow bitter, the young lose their roots—you know the story. Scarle had already had a couple other X's by then, but he came away unsure after that visit. He claimed we had no right to make aliens over into our image. He said he wanted to quit."

WHAT did the Circle say?"

"Nothing, officially. But he was subsequently visited by the woman who had recruited him, and she persuaded him to accept another assignment."

"This last one?"

"Right. Mack 997-IV, the world they call the Butcher. His recruiter explained to him that the first assignments were also in the nature of training, and she proceeded to reveal the rest of the significance of the Ring."

"What was your second assignment like?" you asked him.

He told you that it had been to a brutal and nasty place, with a smelly reptilian culture he had hated. Then you told him that it, also, would be changed as a result of his visit. It would be more congenial, by human standards, because of it. You then told him the full story of King Solomon's Ring—how it had been a divine gift to the Temple Builder, granting him the power to compel obedience from every demon in existence. Neither were all of the demons obnoxious, you assured him; some were useful and some were not. Those of particular malice were forced into bottles, to be stoppered with the ring's unbreakable seal, and cast into the seas to drift forever. The useful ones were put to work building the Temple. And you, Billy Scarle, wear the Ring of Solomon around your mind, and communication is not its only function. You are the Builder—you are enlisting every variety of aid for the construction of the interstellar Temple of Earth. It is the most godlike of all human responsibilities, and there are few of us, very few, capable of furthering this end. You have passed all your tests now, and you are an extremely gifted paralinguist. So gifted, in fact, that

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we wish to entrust you with the most difficult assignment in our files . . .

"He bought it, of course," I finished, with a sip of Danzel coffee. "She could sell igloos on Mercury if she wanted."

THE day was bright, the sky was yellow, and Scarle set down his hum box.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"They won't talk today," he answered. "They just wanted to observe us. They'll be back in about forty hours. They're leaving now."

"Where are they?"

"Behind those bushes." He gestured toward a thicket of reddish, spikey-looking shrubs. "They'll go request permission to talk with us."

"From whom?"

"I don't know."

"How do you know that much? None of the equipment is operating."

"I got a partial impression a minute ago. They're telepathic themselves, and they were talking."

"What do they look like?"

"I don't know. Some sort of big insect, I think. I may be prejudiced by the reports from X1 and X2, though. I feel they're a slave-class creature."

"How come they've taken a week to make up their minds?" I asked him.

He shrugged negatively.

So we walked down to the river and went for a swim, because we had been ordered not to and the captain had no right to give such an order to S-personnel. The shaley ground had a pinholed complexion, the water was warmish, and a grudging breeze fanned us to near-comfort. It was easy to float in the waters of Mack the Knife, as we had nicknamed the Butcher, and there was nothing dangerous lurking below (nothing non-dangerous either—Mack had very little in the way of marine life).

"You scared?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

He did not answer.

"How sure are you of your stability?"

"Certain," he yawned. "Paralings are slightly prescient when it comes to organic actions. *I'd* know in advance if that horsefly that's going to land on your nose were going to bite mine."

I heard a buzz.

I slapped my nose with the flat of my hand, but there was no horsefly. Just a horselaugh.

"Reflex betrayed you," he said, "there are no flies on the Butcher."

I rolled quickly, hoping to dunk him good, but he was not there. His laughter came from a spot about forty feet away on the bank, where he sat smoking.

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"'Certain,'" he repeated.

I rubbed my nose.

"Very funny. When you find a tarantula in your bunk tonight you'll know who . . ."

"Come off it," he called, "I had a point to prove. You were relaxed—ears near water level—background splashes—I didn't say a word. Admit you thought I was beside you. Admit I'm deceptive, cunning, and nasty."

"You know what's on my mind."

"Yes," he said, "you're worried the same thing will happen as before."

"Twice," I added. "Why the devil those bureaucrats couldn't send more than one paraling I . . ."

"One had always been sufficient elsewhere. It will be the same way this time."

"This is a real challenge for you, isn't it?" I snapped. "Whoever talked to you must have put it in a very missionary way."

"So what? An X is an X. I can make it."

"You're just a personnel problem for me," I said, "but the last two paralings to X here *are* still in the bughouse, with EEG readings pretty as horizons."

"There is an old Ortho parable," he told me, "about a guy who asked a computer when he was going to die."

I waited.

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing," he answered. "End of parable. It didn't know."

"Implication being—?"

"My chances of coming back have been calculated as pretty good. There are a lot fewer variables involved this time, because we have the reports of the first two expeditions. This problem *could* be programmed—so who are you to judge, off the cuff?"

I did not say anything. I just thought hard.

But he laughed again, because he had been born on Fenster and he knew the whole Dictionary of Galactic Profanity without having to look anything up.

When we reported back to the ship later, I felt he also knew I did not have any spare tarantulas along.

IT was two days before the creatures returned, and it was gray and raining when they appeared in the clearing. An open-sided field tent was quickly erected, and we donned slickers and sloughed off through the dark mud.

Scarle set the hum-box on a towelled-down table, and I studied our welcome committee . . .

Three of them . . . Ant-like, with the greenish cast of venerable bronze to their steel-hard hides; about the size of German Shepherds—but, I daresay, many times stronger; and eyes blank as Dorn's pink moons, of which they

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reminded me—sightless seeming, but watching with a disconcerting fixity—and it might be they could see anything. (Do you remember Dorn?)

Scarle mouthed some words, turning on the recorder, and the reply came in a *clock-click, th-th-th, bittle-bittle-bittle* series of sounds. He pressed the "Investigate" button and took the black snap-case from his pocket. The red Insufficiency Light came on just as he finished assembling his hypodermic. He turned to the creatures and recited a sonnet by Shelley. It did not fit in with the day, but they responded with more noise and he pressed "Record" again. He jabbed the hypo into an ampule containing a mild sedative and gave himself an injection while they continued ticking.

They seemed to understand what he wanted, because they kept it up for a full four minutes this time. He thumbed the "Investigate" button once more, and I looked out beyond the tent flaps and through the rain.

The Butcher could easily be a treasure trove. The preliminary Geo reports had indicated untapped mineral resources and possible climatological suitability for raising the staples that underspaced Mother Earth found dwindling within her cities; on her shore to shore plains of steel and concrete the dirt Agcities showed as acne rather than beautymarks. But amid the steel pores of Earth, wheat the interloper still meant bread. The Butcher might become a Baker.

THE green light glowed—Tentative Inflectional Patterning Established. Patterns, not meanings. There ain't no box can take *click-click, th-th, bittle-bittle* in one end, cold, and give you, "Good morning, it's raining like hell, isn't it?" out of the other. A completely unfamiliar body of significant sounds has no meaning to a stranger, man or machine, until a referent or two are picked up. Grammar and vocabulary take too long to obtain in times like these, and there were no telepaths good enough for total X, then. But all languages have patterns of inflection. The hum-box separated and established these patterns. It did not know whether they were interrogative, argumentative, repetitive, or what have you, but it sifted them.

The rest was up to Scarle and the hum.

The speakers were placed in their magic circle about the bugs; then another around us. Scarle, the peaceful-looking conductor, eyes at half mast and a drunken smile below, began the concert.

The two-channel inflectional humming began as he poked the

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unit to life. Marginal audibility was preset on our side of things, and the "Investigate" had guessed at the ants' auditory threshold on the basis of their recorded vocal range.

Transmission: Scale spoke under his breath, staring at nothing. Each of the ninety-seven questions of the Omni, with its optional subsections, lurked, script-like, in his mind. The thing, as you know it, Lisa, is carefully planned. I here detail you that Known, because I have things to say about it which will bear directly upon my subject.

THE scoffers first called it a sneaky way to dignify a seance, but all's quiet on that front these days. The dope, plus the occupation of the consciousness with the format of the Omni, is sufficient to conjure our ghosts —the thought-ghosts, which jump the gap between the consciousness of the Queried to that buried point in the mind of the Questioner, from whence they hitch a ride upward on waves of post-query curiosity, pouring into the wordless sentences of the half-heard hum. With a good paraling like Scarle, the ghosts visit us too, if we keep our minds quiet. His steno was a ling-journeyman who had never made it in transmission.

WORD BODY ONE (FULL RANGE INFLECT CYCLES): Good morning/afternoon/evening. We greet you in the name of Earth and bid you good hunting/fishing/harvests/fertile cattle/victories. We are warm-blooded, omnivorous, patriarchal, highly intelligent creatures. We need many things. We have many things to offer others, whether the others are like or different. What are you? What do you/have you/need you?

And question for question, each completes an Omni on the other. Theoretically, that places each in an equal position of knowledge, and appraises bargaining power on an above the board basis. Actually, since we designed it, along with the stock answers, and have refined the Staff Evaluation procedure from an art down to a science, we always come out on top. Equity is a pretty concept, but depth psychology, followed by military analysis and augmented by power on any level—from religious through economic—gives us our small advantages without disturbing the senates.

Like a bad connection on hyperphone came the ambisexual answers:

—Good morning. We are servants. We serve. Our owners/rulers lay eggs. We are omnivorous. We are intelligent. We do not need anything. Our owners/rulers give us all. What do you want?

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And on it rolled. To all our key questions: *We do not do that/ know that/need that. Our owners /rulers do that/ know that/do not need that.*

They told us all about themselves. A dedicated entomologist would have been in a Moslem paradise of the mind over the interview, as was our dedicated entomologist, Dave Bolton.

"Please," said he, "ask them if they see this polaroid flash—"

"Shh!" said I, who supervised. "Later."

Was I detecting a beartrap in the flowerbed of their cooperation?—We want to be helpful, but darn it! sir, we just do not know the answer to that one. Etc.

Do not suggest, I wrote on a slip of paper, *that we speak with their masters. Wait and see if they offer.*

I placed the note before Scarle, hoping that the act of reading it would keep him from transmitting the thought. I waited to see.

They offered.

Scarle turned to me.

"Tell them we must confer," I answered. "Ask where the masters are, what they are like, why they did not come themselves—and ask if they suggested we send you."

"Me?"

"You."

He asked, and they told us they would have to confer.

Yes, they finally acknowledged, as a matter of fact their rulers (who lived in eternal night) had mentioned that we could send them our only paraling if anything needed clarification. Did we care to?

"Tell them 'yes'," I said, "but not today. We need to confer some more."

That afternoon we Staff Evaluated a very sketchy Omni.

WE decided, after an intrepid imaginative foray, that the rulers were similar to ant queens and did not like to leave the nest. Our mission was to get an Omni on the Butcher, evaluate it, and write a recommendation, so we had to go see them if they would not come to us. We wanted to set up safeguards, though, so Scarle spent the night learning the depressive neuroses Hale said he could retreat into to protect his sanity, if the going got rough.

"Quite against the rules, we also armed ourselves to the teeth," I said to Hale, "and then armed our teeth with the little glass capsules I almost got to taste. You didn't know about those."

"I had guessed, of course," he snorted. "There was nothing wrong with my neuroses, though. I gave him the best ones I had in stock."

"I'm sure he appreciated that," I answered, pouring him a drink.

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"Do you believe the legend of King Solomon's ring?"

"Well, archetypically—"

"Archetypes, hell! Do you believe the story?"

"Yes, it has many levels of non-conscious meaning."

"Well step over to my level for a minute and answer the question. Forget the psych-structure stuff. Can one intelligence control another by non-physical means?"

"Charisma," he stated, "is a peculiar phenomenon. Many factors are generally operative."

"Have another drink and swallow your charisma along with it. I'm talking about parapsych stuff. If a paraling can send *and* receive thoughts and feelings, why not more than that?"

"Commands?" he asked. "Parahypnotics? That *can* be accomplished, under special circumstances."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a lightning bolt fusing sand in its own image."

I started to pour again.

"No," he declined it, "psychologists just get drunk, but psychiatrists get drunk and break things. What are you driving at with all this?"

"The Ring works both ways."

It does, Lisa. More than just translation. That first dim day in the caves Scarle ended a 30-second exchange and the steno threw down his transcriber.

"I can not record," he said.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The hum-box isn't working right. I'm not getting voices, or even concepts."

"What are you getting?"

"A very beautiful humming sound—it's like a piece of music—an emotional synopsis of something. Don't ask me what."

I didn't. I asked Scarle. Angry at having been lulled into a pleasant lethargy myself, I shook off the spell and called out.

"What's going on?"

"Shh!"

I groped for his shoulder in the murk, but his whisper had no direction and he was nowhere near the machine.

"Lights!" I called. But before I called it, I thought it.

There was a sound like someone scrubbing concrete with a hard-bristled brush and our beams exploded in all directions.

WE humans were alone, and Scarle. He leaned against the wall of the tunnel about ten feet in advance of our party, and he was smiling. I repeated my question.

"Nothing," he answered. "Nothing's going on now. I wish you hadn't turned on the lights. You broke the agreement."

"I was not anxious to become anything's breakfast," I told him. "What were you doing?"

"I was telling her how I looted

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the Moonstone in mid-flight."

"*You* pulled that one."

"I did."

"Why were you telling them about it?"

"Because I was asked. It was in my memory and a fuller explanation of the principle of illicit appropriation was desired."

I remember that I whistled then—in order to keep myself from doing anything else.

"That is not exactly Omni material," I said softly.

"No, but I was asked . . ."

"Why?"

"She was curious as to the pleasure linked with the thoughts."

"*She?*"

"Yes, a female. You were right about queens."

"An ant?"

"I guess so."

"Why won't she let us see her?"

"I believe the light bothers her eyes."

"The whole thing smells. I want a full report on this X after we get back to the ship, but let's get back fast. I don't like it here."

He smiled and shrugged and I checked the ampule, but he had not taken an overdose.

Later, I asked him again.

"They want to know how to loot a spaceship?"

"No." He leaned back in a recliner, blowing smoke rings. "She only wondered about the pleasure-associations."

"So what did you tell her?"

"Nothing, I just let her look at my mind."

"Then what did she say?"

"Nothing, she seemed satisfied."

"Why were the pleasure-associations there?"

He smiled slightly.

"I enjoy stealing. Especially when I can get away with it."

"Unfortunately," I replied, "that tells me more about you than it does about the ants."

"You asked me a question. I answered it."

"What came next?"

"That's all. You turned on the lights."

"That's not much."

"*I* didn't turn on the lights."

"Okay," I growled. "How come Brown couldn't record?"

"We were using a form of mental shorthand."

"Where did you learn it?"

"I just sort of fell into it today. They're natural paralings."

"That, in itself, is a valuable commodity. We'll have to investigate it, along with the Omni stuff."

"I agree. Next time don't turn on the lights, though."

"All right, mister. But no more professional advice on space piracy."

"No more," he promised.

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SO we went back into the underground cities of the Butcher, guided by belt sonar and five-watt flicker buttons, to mine the minds of the ants.

Brown was still unable to record anything; under hypnosis he could recall the transmission sensations, but nothing else. We had to rely on Scarle for the reports, and after about a week and a half I was no longer sure we were getting them.

"Scarle, have you been editing your reports?"

"No."

"Would you care to verify that under drugs?"

"You calling me a liar?"

"Perhaps."

"Okay, give me some drugs," he laughed.

Then the thought occurred to me (maybe he had sent it when he laughed) that the drugs would not prove anything. He had built up a resistance to most of the hypnotics while in training; they just made his mind shift gears.

"Forget it," I told him.

"I already have," he agreed.

What we really needed was another paraling to check on the paraling we already had.

SCARLE's reports showed us the picture of a giant ant-colony, ruled in the classic monolithic manner. Its structure seemed one of low workers, middle workers, upper workers, warriors, consorts, and queens. It was an agrarian culture which had never developed a single tool, relying rather upon classes of physically specialized individuals for the accomplishment of work. It was based on a matriarchal concept which permeated its religion in a manner similar (I think) to the old Egyptian notion of the Pharoahs' divine descendency.

I emptied the little coffee pot into the tiny cups, motioned to the waiter to bring us another, and looked out across the sunken gardens of Luna at the mossy ball shaping Americas above the great dome: Europe rolling away, Andalusia teasing memories from my mind, and the Gulf beginning to drip salt on sore places, Lisa. By the way, by the time you receive this billy-do, my dear, I will no longer be here, but there, and winging guess where?

"Both ways?" Hale asked me, a perplexed expression dodging about the Eiffel Tower.

I turned back, nodding.

"Yes, I suspected it after Scarle's reports started sounding as if I were reading the same report over and over. I asked myself what he could possibly be covering up, or stalling for. Then I decided maybe *he* wasn't."

"That's why you wanted to X it yourself?"

"Correct," I acknowledged,

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"which is why I requisitioned a paraling drug kit from your cabin."

"Which is why our pinochle game got interrupted by a belly-ache."

"Yes, I paid the comm man to get sick."

"An unsupervised X by a non-p.l. is never without its dangers."

"So I'd heard, but that's why Personnel is full of ex-Guardsmen—to sponge up the puddles of trouble before someone steps in them."

"Or turn them into lakes," he reflected. "So what about Scarle? What *did* happen?"

"Like the report says, he went off his rocker and tried to kill us all. I had to shoot him in self defense."

"Do you remember doing it?"

"Sort of . . . Anyway, that's what the report says."

He surrounded me.

"You were inside his mind." Each word weighed equal to its neighbor.

"Yes, it's all in the report."

"And you were with him at the time he became unbalanced."

"That's right."

"And you came away thinking *you* were Scarle, after you had killed him."

"That also is correct. The report said it was a neurotic identification brought on because I was cathecting at the onset of trauma."

"I know, I wrote it. But I'm seldom happy just to stick a label on something, and that's what I did. It's been over two months now, and I may not see you again for a long while. I'd like to re-examine my diagnosis before we say good-bye."

"Okay, we're both in a condition where I can tell you what really happened and blame it on the drinks if you ever ask me again."

So I told him. Do you remember that water cruise we took a couple years ago, on Jansen, and that one island we stopped at, the one where you talked me into playing a limbo game with the kids? I was bending over backwards to please and I fell flat on my backside in the process, but I made a more memorable impression than if I had succeeded. I know Hale did not believe the entire story—I could hear his gears grinding—but he was impressed. More than I had anticipated.

I told him how I had accompanied Scarle back into the lands beneath the land that day, swinging along to a monomaniac Guard marching tune calculated to assure mental privacy. I had washed out of Circle training in the second month myself, because of a concept-blurring tendency. I am sure you are not aware that I had even attempted

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it (I probably did it because of the name), and I could see Hale recalling my personnel record and seizing upon it as an explanation for my story—an explanation for what had really saved me. He was wrong, but it did not matter. He still believed much of what I said.

Nearly anybody can achieve a percentage of X under optimum conditions; I always can, and it is higher than average. This time it was sufficient.

The nimbus of our flickerlights was not a far-reaching thing, consequently the Queried (?), as always, remained a part of the darkness. Like a shaded Medusa, she hovered before us, and we could feel her presence and sense her exchanges with Scarle. The voices of winds and grasses and the sounds of cellars and the cries of high cables and the monotonous commenting of seashells buzzed at the bottom of our auditory threshold and worked occasional fractured multiwords, without genuine context. An illicit and indefinable feeling of not being wanted crept through me as I prepared the injection.

". . . Not take . . . les nourritures (?) . . . sadly . . . and stealing, Romany (?) . . . go . . . all things—pause—corpus meum . . . why? Brigand from the stars . . . perhaps—"

And my head swam and I was inside and no one had noticed and the night was cool.

I stood there feeling like a photographic negative of Scarle. Object rained upon subject, a plethora of stimuli waterfall upon my mind, but I kept my mind quiet. Perhaps it was the intensity of the communication that caused them to overlook my presence. I eased into Scarle's mind and read there the fascination with what is impossible.

Whatever it was in the tunnel, it was not a giant ant in Scarle's mind/my mind. We were talking with a lovely, yellow-tressed young lady who reminded me of yourself, Lisa, and she was obviously fascinated with our person. We were linked with a host of criminal concepts only recently learned in the society of the tunnels, and never before encountered on an intimate basis. She was in love with Scarle/me/us, and her sadness was great.

"I cannot do to you," she said, "what I did with the others; and you, more than any of them, are that which threatens us. If Earth prevails here, as it has on Malmson, Bareth, and the other worlds you have visited, we will be as doomed as they. Yet, you have lived by their principle of thievery, and I cannot hate you for it. Let us talk of other things and postpone our final conflict. Tell me again of your looting days . . ."

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IT was not then that the part of Scarle that was me suddenly got the shakes and was noticed. It was a moment later, when my nervous introspecting revealed that we/I(?) returned the creature's sentiments. Then it was all over in a surrealistic kaleidescope that I watched through more eyes than I care to count.

The Ring works both ways. Or Rings. She wore the stronger one. Ours was a candybox imitation.

Communication was an incidental virtue of Solomon's ring, remember? Its main function was the controlling of malevolent entities, of bending their actions to the wearer's will, of impressing *their* wills with commands like hot irons . . .

She seized Scarle's/mine/our (?) mind, with a hurricane of mixed emotions backing the assault.

"Kill them all!" came the order.

I guess Brown was the first to sense what was happening, because he flicked on a light beam.

And she stood there, flinching at the light—a gigantic, rainbow-winged gargoyle, with antennae like black seaweed surfaced on a stormlit ocean crest.

That is doubtless what saved us all. Despite the command, Scarle and I were frozen by the shock of seeing—of seeing the truth that your symbol had concealed, as the music was torn from our mind by the light, and the order roaring again after the flash, like a thunderclap:

"Kill them!"

That was when we went mad. I saw Scarle through my eyes and the cathedral windows of *her* eyes, and myself through that same colored glass *and* Scarle's eyes, and I/we saw her, both, and we obeyed the command.

There was gunfire and I dropped down the pipe of a titanic organ, vibrating to something that I might have been able to recognize if I had had the time to listen.

The time passed, and one day I could hear again.

The command had worked divisively. Although Scarle and I had been one in mind, the ordered "Kill them!" had affected two separate nervous systems, and I beat him to the draw. It was that simple, although I do not remember doing it.

I collapsed from the psychic drain before I could kill anyone else; or possibly it had been the light that slowed her, or the sudden death of Scarle. She lost her control, retreated; and the crew retreated, both bearing their casualties.

IN that brief time when our mind(s) were flooded, refuge for sanity was found in the men-

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tal foxholes Hale had dug. I crouched beneath neurotic breakwalls, communicating with Oedipus of things long ago and far away in the streets of Fenster. I was alternately depressed or elated as my fathers beat me or bought me candy, and always resentful, and always Scarle, and always wanting to know what they were thinking so I could know which way to jump, and always wanting to make them like me even though I hated their guts, and always, Lisa, I remembered mother and the thirteenth card of the Major Arcana—the Boney Reaper, Death—whom I feared most of all, but had to challenge every day in order to be big and not need anybody, and he was the navigator of the Steel Eel, but I was the captain.

It took more than a month for me to begin being myself again, but differently. Scarle, the man who had enjoyed stealing whenever he could get away with it, would have been pleased with his last theft. He had stolen part of my mind and left me a portion of his, in passing. He took with him a measure of my devotion to the policies of the Circle, and he left me with a calculated, antisocial quality which I have decided is a virtue.

I/we feel that the ant queen was right, that i/We were right after Malmson, and that the Temple is being maintained upon a foundation of spurious principles, the walls shored up at an inconceivably dear cost—the racial integrity of a thousand alien peoples. For this reason, I have decided to rebel. The transference left me the means of doing so. I am now a paraling in my own right, and the encounter with your image on the world called the Butcher left me with the *full* range of the Ring's powers. I, too, can compel actions, alter thoughts, require affections.

Hale said to me: "Do you feel like Scarle any more?"

And I said: "I *am* Billy Scarle."

And then I said: "It may well be that he imprinted—" right in step with the same words as they emerged from Hale's mouth.

The Machiavelli eyes, like black circles painted on ice cubes, sought my own for an explanation.

"I am Billy Scarle," I repeated, "as well as myself. He lurks at the bottom of my mind and jeers at the facade of morality with which the Circle masks the piracies of Earth. He indicates, too, that he was almost executed for similar acts on a smaller scale."

"I don't give a hoot about politics and policies," said Hale, "but you are a psychiatric curiosity. Once in a lifetime—something like this—a parapsych

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transference of personality traits *and* abilities! We are going to write a paper!"

"We are going to eat dinner," I said.

"But we've already eaten—"

"In the lighter gravitation of Luna two meals set as easily as one—and we're big people, with stomach for lots of things, aren't we?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"King Solomon had a ring," I told him, "and communication was not its only end. It could be used to compel the obedience of every demon in existence, and I, Billy Scarle, wear that ring around my mind like an emotional chastity belt. You are on the side of the demons, Hale. Not all of the demons are malevolent, though, and many can be put to work building the Temple properly. I am recruiting you to spread the dogma of Many Mansions, and to fill them with an interstellar brotherhood. I am going to steal your philosophy, like a magpie, and leave you another in its place."

The Seal of Solomon became a hot scalpel in my mind, and after awhile I said, "What are we going to have for dinner?" and he said, "How about steaks?"

THAT, Lisa, is the story of my dinner/s last night (I think it was last night; I am not back on the Earth time-scale yet). I left Doctor Hale assured of my complete recovery from the Scarle-neurosis, and I caught the next shuttle for Earth. Earth fills the viewport while I write these lines, my darling, as my mind fills with double memories of you. I believe that Scarle loved you, as much as he was capable of loving anything, and I know that I always have. I shall know in a few hours which of us (if either) may have evoked similar feelings in you—that, when we talk of the past in the wordless pentagrams of our profession. I wish to enlist you in my crusade, also—I say "enlist", not "induct". I believe that I have almost a century of productive time before me. With your able assistance I could use that time changing the minds of the men who are the mind of Earth and the soul of its policies. If you decline, it shall only cost you an hour out of your memory. You were such a fine recruiter, and there is something to what Hale says about charisma.

If I try to go it on my own I may trip up soon—but, either way, I *will* have a go at it—and I have prepared this lengthy proposal and invitation (which I shall post after landing) in order to apprise you of the circumstances which have brought me here, as well as my feelings for you. I probably overestimate the

(*Continued on page 98*)

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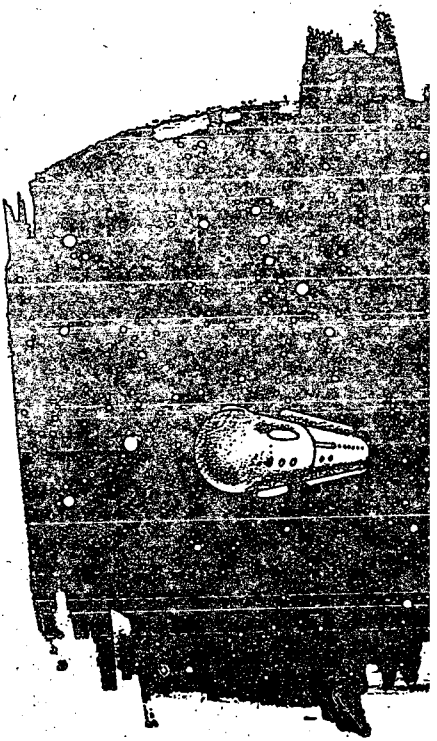
Which answers mankind's problems better: a stern god or a tolerant one? And what do you do if you have the power to decide it either way?

LET THERE BE NIGHT

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrator SCHELLING



DEEP-SPACE undertows are rare, but when you get caught in one you may as well say farewell to your family and your friends, because you're never going to see any of them again.

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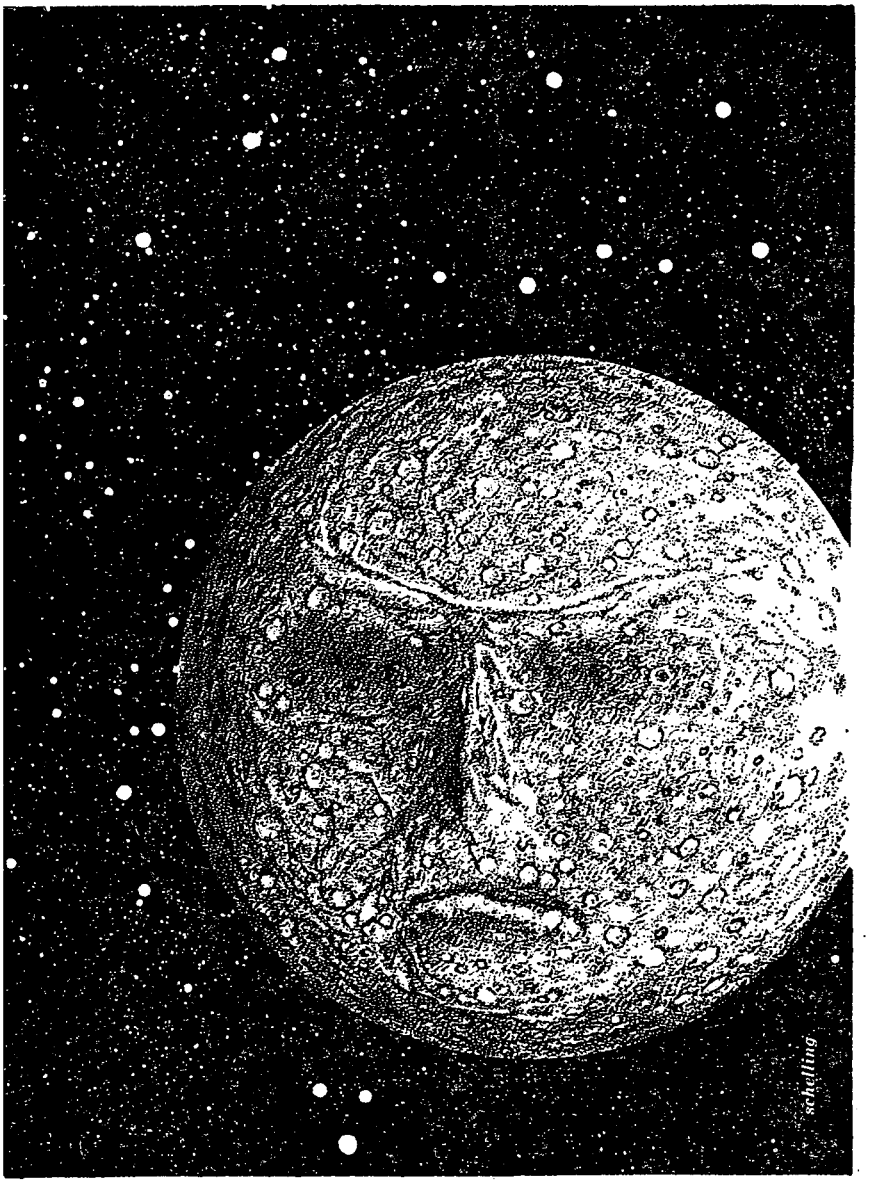

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The deep-space undertow that grabbed my one-man projectile-torpedo boat during the 2324 space maneuvers off Procyon 16 must have dragged the craft halfway across the galaxy. At any rate, when I re-emerged in normal space I couldn't spot so much as a single familiar constellation. For the record, my N.E.S.N. serial number is 44B-6507323, my rank is PT-boat pilot, second class, and my name is Benjamin Hill. Once upon a time I was a schoolteacher.

My undertow must have had a conscience of sorts, for it had permitted the PT-boat to surface near a star with a family of six planets. For lack of a better designation I dubbed the system "System X", and homed in on it in hopes of finding an amenable world on which I could live out the remainder of my years. X-4 looked pretty good. It had an inclination of 2.3 degrees, which meant seasons, and a spectroanalysis revealed an earth-type atmosphere. There was a moon, too —a great big one that moved in an orbit similar to the one maintained by Old Earth's moon. However, I wasn't interested in moons, and after a cursory glance at this one I dropped the PT-boat down closer to the planet in order to get a better look at my potential home-to-be.

Seas covered about four-fifths of the surface, and there was only one habitable continent—a small land-mass with four long promontories stretching out from its main body somewhat in the manner of arms and legs. The other continents—if you want to call them that—were distributed in the arctic and the anarctic regions, and except for their northern and southern littorals were about as hospitable to warm-blooded life as a bunch of icebergs.

Well, one continent was better than none. I began orbiting in. Almost as though it had been waiting for me to come to my decision, the ion drive burned out.

Apparently my undertow had not had a conscience after all.

All that saved me were my retros and my drag chute. The retros enabled me to bring the PT-boat down on the habitable planet, albeit on a rugged mountainside, and the chute enabled me to bring the boat down gently enough to avert an accidental detonation of my payload of projectiles. Planetfall took place in the twilight belt, and when I stepped through the locks, the moon was just beginning to rise.

DID I say "moon"? I shouldn't have, because even though the term is technically correct it wasn't the word that came into my mind when the satellite rose above the horizon. "Man" was the word. Or maybe "god". Think-

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ing back now, it's hard to tell.

"The man in the moon" is a familiar enough phenomenon to anyone who has ever visited Old Earth, and satellites with "faces" in them are no more unusual than comets with "tails". If a person looks hard enough and long enough, he can find a face in anything. But this face wasn't in the moon—it *was* the moon. Or, more accurately, it was that hemisphere which had been hidden from me during my approach and which I have been too preoccupied to notice while orbiting in for a landing. The moon, in toto, was a "head".

Unlike Old Earth's famed satellite, this satellite was young; its face, however, was anything but. It was the face of an old, old man—a cantankerous old man who hated planets, who hated people, who hated light and laughter; who hated, in short, just about anything or anyone you could think of. The frown embodied in that countenance was so intense that it was almost tangible, and it pervaded the very moonlight in which I stood.

I re-entered the PT-boat and aligned and focused one of the telescopic projectile-sights. The "forehead" was a vast plateau. The "eyebrows" were forested littorals. The "eyes" were seas. The "nose" was a mountain range. The "lips" were a pair of barren ridges. The "bearded" "cheeks" were forested lowlands. The "chin" was a tundra. The "ears" were mesas, while the plateau that constituted the "forehead" extended up and back into a gleaming, "hairless" pate. The atmosphere softened the visage somewhat, but not nearly enough appreciably to affect its austerity.

A plateau, a pair of seas, a mountain range, two ridges, two mesas, a Paleozoic forest, and a tundra—interesting topography, certainly, but nothing to get particularly excited about for all its realistic physiognomic pattern. Nothing for a member of sophisticated society to get particularly excited about, that is. But how about a member of a naive society? Specifically, how about the race of people that had built the primitive village I had glimpsed in the distance while coming down on the mountainside? What would be, or rather, what had been, its reaction to such a phenomenon?

It was a discomfiting question, the more so because I couldn't answer it. Presently I gave up trying and went to bed. All through the night I lay half awake and half asleep, trying to put the life I once had known, and would never know again, behind me. In the morning I got together the few essentials I would need to see me to the village, pocketed a small ion pistol

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just in case, secured the PT-boat's locks, and started down the mountainside. There are some people who do not need the presence of other people in order to live a rich and satisfying life. I am not one of them.

LIKE Zarathustra, I went down my mountain alone, meeting no one. In the forest below, however, I did not come upon an old man looking for roots. I came upon a girl bathing in a brook.

This is considerably simpler in the telling than it was in the actual doing. The half trek-half climb down that mountainside had taken me three days—twenty-six hour ones—and I had been in the forest the better part of the fourth.

The girl had long auburn hair that looked darker than it really was because it was wet. She had big, almost luminous, gray eyes, an attractive nose, and rather full lips. A dimple dotted the center of her chin. There had been some doubt in my mind whether the natives of X-4 would turn out to be human—there are some recorded cases of planets of the genus Old Earth giving birth to nonhuman intelligences—but as I watched the girl, the doubt was dispelled. If anything, she was more than human, physically at least, and glimpsing the flash of her long symmetrical legs and the white gleamings of her graceful arms and shoulders I felt like Adonis spying on Venus. If the analogy doesn't quite come off, I alone am to blame, because while I failed to qualify as Adonis, the girl in the brook was on a par with Venus, and then some.

I made myself comfortable in the underbrush and waited till such time as she should come out of the water, dress, and start for home. At length I saw her climb dripping up on the bank and start drying herself with a coarse cotton towel, shivering all the while in the cold spring wind that wafted through the forest. The drying operation completed, she slipped into several cotton undergarments, after which she spread out a rug-like length of some indeterminate material, lay down, and rolled herself up in it in such a way that only her arms, shoulders, and head protruded from one end, and her legs, from the knees down, from the other. When she stood up she was about as sexy as an animated stovepipe, and you would have thought that no further affront to her feminine dignity was possible. It was, though. The gray dress she proceeded to get into covered her from her neck to her ankles and was stayed so that it formed an upright cone. The animated stovepipe had now become an animated tepee.

Finally, after slipping her feet into a pair of clodhopper shoes,

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she produced a comb from the voluminous interior of her dress and proceeded to comb her hair. It fell all the way to the small of her back, and how she managed to comb it straight back from her face and forehead and compress it into a bun no bigger than a billiard ball I'll never understand, but comb and compress it she did, after which she donned a bonnet that matched her dress and that hid not only all of her hair but half of her face as well. Looking at her, I saw no vestige whatsoever of the girl I had seen bathing in the brook, but fortunately—or unfortunately, as the case may be—I have a good memory.

A PATH bordered the opposite bank of the brook, and presently she started along it in the direction of the village. I waited till the trees hid her from view, then I forded the brook at a point where the waters ran relatively shallow, and detoured around her at a brisk dogtrot. Emerging on the path, I laid down on the ground and made like I had dropped in my tracks. It wasn't a particularly difficult subterfuge to bring off, for my three days on the mountainside and my three-quarters of a day in the forest had taken just about all the starch out of me, and the brisk dogtrot had decimated the modicum there was left.

I kept one eye on the alert in case the sight of me lying helpless on the path failed to evoke the reaction I was gambling on and evoke a diametrically different one instead. I needn't have worried: the minute she rounded a turn in the path and saw me, she became a veritable engine of concern and bore down upon me in a flurry of feminine tenderness. Kneeling beside me—no small accomplishment in that outfit she had on—she felt my forehead. Next, she lay her head upon my chest and listened for my heartbeat. All this while I had been watching her with one slitted eye; now, I opened both eyes, raised my head, and looked full into her face. We were so close, our noses almost touched. *"Pervitu es lliren?"* she asked, straightening abruptly.

I propped myself into a sitting position. Getting across the phony background I had decided upon—i.e., that I had suffered a total loss of memory, had wandered away from my own village (if there was one, there had to be others), and become lost in the forest—was no easy matter with nothing to work with except a series of improvised signs, but at length I managed, and was rewarded by a warm look of sympathetic understanding. Helping me to my feet, she pointed down the path in the direction of the village and indicated by means of

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several improvised signs of her own that I was to accompany her to her home, where I would be suitably cared for. She even proffered her shoulder for me to lean on. I didn't avail myself of it, however, I may be an opportunist, but I draw the line when it comes to taking undue advantage of trusting females.

As we walked slowly along, she kept glancing curiously at my torn and begrimed space fatigues. I hoped they weren't too radically different from the garments worn by the menfolk of her village, and apparently they weren't, for after a while her interest waned and her glances petered out. The trail widened gradually into a rutted road. The ruts spelled wagons, and hoofmarks in between them spelled some manner of equine beast of burden. The brook purled along beside the road, and occasionally I glimpsed small game in the underbrush bordering the opposite bank. Some of the trees had some kind of letters carved in their trunks. There were birds everywhere, and the way was sweet with their evening songs. In several sheltered places, pale patches of snow lingered. Certainly, I reflected, it was rather early in the season for a girl to be bathing in a brook.

Shadow lengthened around us, and I could tell from the way my companion kept trying to step up our pace that she wanted to make it home before darkness fell. Noticing the increasing coolness of the air, I thought I knew why, but I didn't really till darkness actually did fall. Then, when she knelt down in the middle of the road and bowed her head, I realized that she was afraid.

Afraid of that silly satellite rising into the sky.

I made haste to kneel down beside her. I couldn't of course join her in the little prayer that she uttered—I learned afterward that it was a prayer beseeching forgiveness for being out after dark with a man to whom she was not betrothed—but obviously my comportment left nothing to be desired for, several moments later when she got to her feet and looked down at me, I saw gratitude shining in her eyes.

I stood up beside her. Before we started on our way again, I stole a look at old mountain-nose. I had already figured out his habits—that is to say, his orbital velocity and his trajectory—and knew that during each twenty-six hour period he rose and set at the same time and consequently underwent no phases. The look he gave me back seemed even dirtier than the previous looks I had rated. Now that I came to think of it, there was something familiar about that somber frown of his. Somewhere or other I had encountered it before. Suddenly I

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remembered. I had seen it on the face of Michelangelo's Yahweh in the Sistine Chapel.

THE village began without preamble. It was situated near the shore of a small lake, and consisted of a cluster of perhaps three thousand buildings crisscrossed by avenues and side streets just wide enough for two medium sized wagons to pass comfortably. With the exception of a half dozen large, factory-like structures standing in a sizable clearing on the outskirts, the buildings were all alike, so a description of the one the girl led me to should suffice. The ground floor measured something like 35X35X12 feet and was constructed of heavy planking. Two square windows and a thick rectangular door distinguished the façade from the other three sides, and there was a small plot of ground separating it from the street. At first glance, the second floor seemed to be nothing more than a set of shingleless rafters rising steeply into a series of individual peaks; at second glance, however, the glass roofing material became visible, and you realized that you were confronted with a large second-story room, the walls and ceiling of which were one enormous skylight. Rising along the rear wall and protruding from the transparent peak was a stone chimney, and from its mouth issued a thin trail of smoke.

The girl opened the door and we went inside. Like the second floor, the ground floor consisted of but one room. It was commodious enough, however, and functioned as living room, dining room, and kitchen. The kitchen was located along the rear wall and featured a big stone hearth in which an anemic wood-fire was burning. Next to the hearth, a ladder climbed the wall to a trap door in the ceiling. The dining room was little more than a round wooden table, several wooden chairs, and a box-like affair that functioned as a sort of buffet and cupboard combined. The living room was about as cozy as a third-class spaceport waiting room. There was a long wooden bench, a wooden armchair, and a small wooden table. On the table burned the source of the room's sole illumination—a primitive oil lamp with a glass chimney. Attached to the table's legs a few feet above the bare plank floor was a rack, and on this rack lay a thick book bound in black leather. No one needed to tell me what kind of a book it was, and no one needed to tell me who—or rather, what—its subject matter concerned.

"In" the kitchen stood a woman. She was wearing a camouflage-bonnet and a tepee dress, and she was engaged in stirring

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the contents of a large cast-iron kettle that was suspended over the anemic flames of the hearth-fire. "In" the living room sat a man. He was wearing skin-tight black trousers and a black frock coat that came all the way to his knees, and he was engaged in making entries in a large ledger that lay on his lap.

Both the man and the woman looked up when the girl and I came in, and when the girl spoke several words to them they came hurrying over to my side. The man was tall and thin and bearded, and about twice my age (I was twenty-nine at the time). He looked as though he had lost his last friend. The woman was somewhat younger than he was, almost as thin, and she looked as though she too had lost her last friend. Glancing at the girl, I saw the melancholy in her eyes for the first time, and realized that she also looked as though she had lost her last friend. I began to wish that I had remained on my mountain.

THE man indicated that I should lie down on the wooden bench, and after I did so he left the house. While he was gone, the girl brought forth a small basket of greens from the interior of her tepee-dress—her excuse, no doubt, for getting out of the house—and set it conspicuously on the buffet-cupboard; then she got a bowl, spooned some of the iron kettle's contents into it, brought it over to the bench and, kneeling down on the floor, began to spoon-feed me. I sat up a little guiltily then and took the bowl and the spoon from her and began feeding myself. The food was plain, but compared to the PT-boat rations I had been living on for the last four days it was delicious, and I ate every morsel of it. By this time, the man had returned with another man who was also tall and thin and bearded and who also wore skin-tight black trousers and a black, knee-length frock coat. There was a leather sack slung from his neck somewhat in the manner early-American frontiersmen used to carry their powder horns, but the sack didn't have powder in it, it had dried roots. He handed several of them to the woman and she got another, smaller, iron kettle, pumped some water into it from a pump that stood in a corner of the kitchen, added the roots, and hung the kettle beside the big one. Unless I missed my guess, I was in for a dose of spring tonic, X-4 style, that would put iron in my blood.

All of which led me willy-nilly to a rather discomfiting question—to wit, had the medical component of this quaint little culture reached that phase in its development wherein phlebotomy was practiced? Apparently it had

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not, for, after sitting down beside the bench in a chair provided him by my host, the newcomer confined himself to a few taps on my forehead, a look into each of my eyes, and a squint into each of my ears, after which he reslung his sack, said a few words to the man and the woman, and departed. I lay back on the bench with considerable relief.

The dining-room table was set, and husband, wife, and daughter —for such I had concluded their relationship to be—sat down to eat. Well no, they didn't sit down to eat exactly, although eating did play a small role in the proceedings: they sat down to pray. The husband acted as spokesman, and what he had to say took the better part of half an hour and all the while he was saying it he and the two women kept their eyes fixed steadfastly on the round tabletop. I didn't know it at the time, but I found out later that the tabletop symbolized the face of the moon; nevertheless, I did know that the prayer was directed toward none other than the deity whom the moon embodied, and I could tell from what little I could see of their expressions that husband, wife, and daughter were momentarily afraid that the three bowls of stew growing cold on the table before them would be snatched mysteriously away before they had a chance to get busy with their spoons. Judging from the way they finally gobbled down their food, the fear still remained even after the prayer was over.

The meal finished, the woman cleared the table and started washing the dishes, the man returned to the living room and his ledger, and the girl busied herself stirring the contents of the second kettle. At length she spooned a quantity of the mixture into a cup, brought the cup over to where I was lying, and indicated that I should drink from it. I did so reluctantly. The stuff tasted like boiled crabgrass flavored with hickory bark.

THE next item on my evening's agenda was bed. The girl got another lamp, lit it, and led the way up the ladder to the second floor. Talk about your crazy rooms! This one looked for all the world like a big greenhouse. True, there weren't any plants or flowers, but there wasn't any furniture either. All the place contained, so far as I could see, were three mattresses and a big wooden box. However, the girl dug a fourth mattress out of the box and spread it at the base of one of the transparent walls; then, from the same receptacle she procured two blankets, plus a pillow that looked as though it was stuffed with corncobs, and handed the three items to me.

The pillow *was* stuffed with

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corncobs. So was the mattress. But I was tired enough to sleep on anything, and after the girl departed down the ladder with the lamp, closing the trap door behind her, I sprawled out on the mattress with a sigh of contentment and pulled one of the blankets up to my chin. Looking up through the glass ceiling, I saw old mountain-nose looking down on me. The old boy had climbed quite high in the sky by this time, but obviously the additional elevation hadn't helped his disposition any, for the look he gave me was just as dirty as usual. Good lord! I thought suddenly, he can see into every bedroom in the whole village and see everything that goes on in them! Is *that* why the walls and ceilings are made of glass?

I laughed aloud. "You really have got these poor sheep scared out of their wits, haven't you old man?" I said. "You don't scare me, though—not one bit—so go ahead and glare all you want to, and be damned!" I closed my eyes then, and the next thing I knew, the old boy was gone, and his grandfather the sun was climbing into the sky.

MY host relegated the task of "restoring my memory" to his daughter, an eventually that provided me with an even pleasanter setup for learning the language and more than I had hoped for. So you see, a little discretion sometimes pays respectable dividends. Sure, I could have come barging into the village discharging my ion pistol and proclaiming myself the Leader of the People by virtue of my technological godhood, and I might even have gotten away with it; but I never would have been accepted by the people I presumed to lead, and, more important, I never would have truly understood them. The only way truly to understand a race of people is by finding out what makes its culture tick, and the only way to find out what makes a culture tick is by examining it from the inside. People never reveal the innermost secrets of their way of life to a foreigner, regardless of how deeply he may impress them. In the present case, by posing as a member of the race I wanted to understand I had removed this formidable barrier, and nothing would be withheld from me for the simple reason that to all apparent intents and purposes nothing was really being revealed to me. And I wanted to know everything there was to know, because no matter how superior an individual may be to any given culture, he cannot operate in it effectively unless he thoroughly understands it. Conversely, once he does thoroughly understand it, he can, by remaining within the framework of its

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mores, gain virtually any end he wants.

The first thing I learned was that the girl-of-the-brook's name was Ugla Fyrrennha. I am not going to refer to her by any such uncomely combination of letters, however. "Ugla", roughly translated into English, becomes "Chastity", while "Fyrrennha", similarly translated, becomes "smithy" or, taking a logical step forward, "Smith". Neither am I going to refer to any of the other inhabitants of X-4 by their original names, and the same goes for place-names. If you think I'm taking undue liberty in this matter, consider several place-names chosen at random: *Tititiknottofungililibus Renla, Sedisfoppentotten Hargg,* and *Freddirapproppolandis.* Now consider their English equivalents: "Cape Celestial", "Blue Lake", and "Purity".

Purity was the name of the village where Chastity lived, and this was the second thing I learned. It was one of the four major inland towns of the continent (to the natives, the term was "the world") of Perfection. The three other towns were Righteousness, Integrity, and Transcendence. In addition to the four major inland towns, there were six major coastal towns: Truth, Prudence, Straight-and-Narrow-Path, Discretion, Virtue, and Humility. The inland towns served as hubs for farming, lumbering, mining, and manufacturing, while the coastal towns served as hubs for the fishing industry.

An X-4 year consisted of some 320 days. Perfection's monetary standard was platinum. Chastity's father's name was Upright. Her mother's name was Dutiful. Upright operated a smithery on the outskirts of the town, and in addition to his regular duties served, as did the rest of the married males of the community, as a sort of patriarch-parson whose duty it was to teach, preach, and, on the rare occasions when it became necessary, to administer justice. Most of the time his activities along these lines did not extend beyond the walls of his own home, but he was responsible along with his fellow patriarch-parsons for the spiritual, moral, and intellectual level of Purity as a whole, and shared with them the task of administering to the husbandless families of the community; consequently there were evenings when he was absent from his own household. On such occasions supper, the one and only formal meal of the day, was held up until he returned, since eating at the table of the Divine Overseer was unthinkable without first reciting the Prayer of Permission, a function which only a patriarch-parson could perform.

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ALL of which brings us to the subject of that evil-minded old man up there in the sky. The story, as told to me by Chastity after I learned the language, runs pretty much as follows: Millenia ago, the Divine Overseer had had it made up there among the clouds with nothing much to do save gaze benevolently down on the Great Sea he had created in order that he might see the reflection of his face. He had had his body then, and it had been a splendid body indeed, and the Divine Overseer had been tremendously proud of it, lavishing upon it the best of care in order that it would remain eternally resplendent in the radiance of the Great Lamp he had created and hung high in the sky. Then, one day, along came the Divine Overseer's archenemy, He-Who-Had-No-Right-To-Be, and there ensued in the heavens a great battle the like of which had never been known before and would never be known again. He-Who-Had-No-Right-To-Be was armed with a mighty sword, but the Divine Overseer disdained the use of weapons and fought with his bare hands. For years, the battle raged. For centuries. Finally realizing that he had met his match, He-Who-Had-No-Right To-Be resorted to trickery and canted his sword in such a way that the radiance emanating from the Great Lamp ricocheted from the blade into the Divine Overseer's eyes, temporarily blinding him. Around and down came the mighty sword, half severing the Divine Overseer's head from his shoulders, and for a moment it looked as though the battle was over. Not so. A lesser being might have thrown in the towel, but not a being of the Divine Overseer's caliber. With his head threatening momentarily to fall off, he closed in on He-Who-Had-No-Right-ToBe and, seizing the entity's body with his cyclopean hands, tore it to pieces and flung the pieces into the deep distances all around, where they became stars. He-Who-Had-No-Right-To-Be's sword, the Divine Overseer broke across his knee, after which he flung one piece into the east and the other into the west so that for all eternity the blood he had shed would be visible in the sky each time the Great Lamp rose and each time it set. This final herculean deed, however, proved to be the Divine Overseer's undoing, and his head, which all the while had been dangling by no more than a tendon or two, at last detached itself from his shoulders. Then a strange thing happened: instead of his head falling into the Great Sea and floating thereon, his body did, while his head remained in the sky. The second it struck the water, the body lost its resplendence and turned to clay, while the

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head on the other hand became more resplendant than before because in it was concentrated the entire essence of the Divine Overseer. He looked down in sorrow at his once-magnificent body and resolved to keep surveillance over it for the rest of time, and in order to make certain that no harm befell it he created tiny creatures in his former image and made them custodians of his flesh. One of these creatures was the Divine Overseer's favorite, and this creature was called the Little Overseer. Working with the Divine Overseer, he drew up a contract wherein the Divine Overseer agreed to let the people live and prosper on his flesh provided they never kept their activities concealed from his watchful eyes and provided they could live and prosper without sin, which was defined as any act detrimental to the dignity of the Divine Overseer's sacred and sexless body. The people agreed to the terms, and the Little Overseer signed the contract.

I COULDN'T help wondering what kind of a religious cosmogony and what kind of a covenant the Little Overseer and his henchmen would have dreamed up if there had been a smile instead of a frown on that celestial countenance. But you can bet your spaceboots that I didn't share my speculations with Chastity. Instead, I let on that the story was familiar to me—which was true, in a way—and that I thought my memory was finally beginning to come back.

We were returning from the little swimming hole where I had first seen her, and we had been gathering edible greens. As you can well imagine, I had made no reference to her previous visit to the hole, nor to my presence in the underbrush while she had been splashing around in her birthday suit. "It is good that your mind is clearing, Benjamin," she said. (I had broken down my first name to its literal meaning and had translated it along with my last into "Perfectian".) "Father has mentioned several times that he would be glad to take you on as an apprentice at the smithery were it not for your befuddled memory. He is waiting eagerly for the news of your complete cure."

This was strictly in keeping with my plans. "Even though I haven't been able to recall which of the ten towns I came from," I said, "and even though there are a few other odds and ends that still elude me, I think he should take me on at once so that I can start paying him back for his hospitality. You can continue with my ed—my cure evenings."

"Of course, Benjamin."

At this point, a wagon drawn by a team of small but sturdy

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horses came down the rutted road, and as it passed on, Chastity made a quaint little curtsy for the benefit of the driver, a lean, bearded man in his late thirties or early forties with dark hair and shrewd brown eyes. He smiled warmly at her, glared at me, and drove on. "Someone you know?" I asked her.

Her bonnet didn't afford a very extensive view of her cheeks, but just the same I got the definite impression that they had turned pink. "He is Strongwill Dimity. I —I am betrothed to him."

I stared at her. "But he's old enough to be your father!"

"Which makes the honor even greater, does it not? It should be every young woman's wish to marry a man above and beyond her years who can provide for her as well as if he were her own father. Truly, Benjamin, there are still many things you have not yet recalled."

There sure were. "How long have you been betrothed to him?" I asked.

"Since he asked my father for my hand when I was nine years old."

I had been wondering all along how the men in this society ever managed to spot the particular woman they wanted to marry when custom commanded that all girls from the age of ten on up wear rolled rugs, tepees, and camouflage-bonnets. Now I knew. "And how much longer must you be betrothed to him before he can marry you?" I went on.

"For yet another year. I shall become of marriageable age then."

"And nothing can change all this?"

"Only a setback in Strongwill's success in his chosen business, which is the manufacturing of women's garments. And this would not change it either unless the setback were sufficiently severe to reduce his financial status to a level inferior to that of my father's."

"H'm'm," I said. And then, "I take it he's been quite successful. Strongwill, I mean."

"He is one of the richest men in Purity, and of course one of the most devout and pure, since only upon those who walk righteously in the light of the Divine Overseer does financial fortune fall."

The good old Protestant Ethic, I thought. Aloud, I said, "Tell me the truth, Chastity—do you *really* want to marry him?"

She seemed inordinately interested in a patch of wild flowers that bloomed beside the road. "I —I consider it to be a fitting and auspicious arrangement."

"That's what I thought," I said. "Well, I guess the sooner I go to work for your father, the better."

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NOT knowing my plans, she quite naturally took it for granted that I had changed the subject, and the matter of her marriage was not brought up again during our walk back to the town. I went to work in the smithery the next morning. It was a big plank building with open areas in the roof for the heat and the charcoal fumes to escape through and it stood in a large clearing in the forest a little distance back from the shore of the lake. The forges were primitive affairs, and the *modus operandi* was downright ridiculous. Now, it's no trick at all for an average man from a technologically mature society to advance himself in a society in which technology is in the embryo stage; nevertheless, I didn't try to introduce modern techniques into Upright's smithery overnight. Instead, I contented myself with making this minor change and that, with Upright's approval of course, and in each instance I let on that I was as surprised as he was when the change resulted in higher production and better products. There was one other apprentice besides myself—a bright young fellow named Stanch Meadows—and it wasn't very long before we were getting out our work in half the time Upright had allotted for it. This state of affairs afforded me the psychological opportunity which I had been patiently waiting for, and I discreetly suggested to Upright that it might be a good idea to make use of the time we had saved by putting Stanch and myself to work building a wing, with the object in mind of turning the smithery into a combination smithery and foundry and producing our own iron. What I had in mind was a small steel mill and foundry combined, but I didn't say so, for steel—true steel, that is—was unknown in Perfection. Anyway, Upright went for the idea and ordered the necessary materials, and Stanch and I went to work.

I don't pretend to be much of a carpenter or much of a mason, nor do I pretend to be an engineer; but, having been exposed to what is known on New Earth as an all-purpose education, I knew enough about the two trades and the profession to be able to build a primitive steel mill without too much trouble. When it came time to build a furnace—the most important phase of the project—I didn't try for anything fancy, not only because I was incapable of building an advanced electric hearth, but because I hadn't 'invented" electricity yet and didn't intend to for some time to come. The people of Perfection were still too unsophisticated to be able to accept so radical an innovation, and if I had come up with it out of a clear blue sky,

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the feat could very well have been construed as being magical in nature and have inspired comment to the effect that I just might be in league with He-Who-Had-No-Right-To-Be, whose *disjecta membra*, it was said, sometimes exerted influence on certain individuals who did not walk quite righteously enough in the light of the D.O. No, rather than stick my neck out, I settled for a small Bessemer Converter, and I must say, it filled the bill quite nicely. Next, I doubled back and got to work on a small blast furnace, and afterward, a number of small ladles, following which I tried my hand at a modest rolling mill, the materials for which I manufactured myself with Stanch's able assistance, and a soaking pit. Finally, again with the able assistance of Stanch, who had turned out to be an ideal right-hand man, I built a simple, hand-hoist operated stamping press and made several reasonably accurate dies. Meanwhile, I had gotten in a supply of raw materials, and a week later, Upright Smith & Co., to the consternation of its owner, started turning out stainless-steel pots and pans that made the cast-iron ones on the market look sick. The old man came through with a ten-percent partnership, and I was on my way.

Getting Strongwill Dimity out of the picture was only a minor part of my over-all plan; nevertheless, I decided that the sooner I took care of the matter, the better. Hence the next item on my industrial agenda was a textile mill. After I built it, I installed the most modern equipment I could devise. Although my machines fell far short of being modern by New Earth standards, they were downright *avant-garde* by Perfection standards, and once I got a steady supply of cotton coming in from Straight-and-Narrow-Path, the southernmost of the inland towns, I was turning out women's wear at half the existent market-price and had one-third of the women of Purity, including Chastity, working for me. Old Strongwill didn't have a chance, and Dimity & Co. closed down lock, stock, and barrel. I met him on the street not long afterward, and I still bear the scars left by the two holes his eyes burned through me as we passed each other.

WITH three months still to go, Upright Smith himself broke the betrothal, saying that no daughter of his was going to marry a pauper. The action was tantamount to condemning Chastity to spinsterhood—or would have been under ordinary circumstances—since it was highly improbable that any of the town's eligible bachelors would propose to a girl whose physical qualifica-

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tions were an unknown quality. And in the event that there might be one or two who could remember what Chastity had looked like before donning the rolled-rug, tepee-dress, and camouflage-bonnet of maidenhood, the odds were one hundred-to-one that they were already betrothed. So, as you can see, I had a pretty clear field.

I didn't take advantage of it right away, however: I had a number of other things I wanted to do first. You might think that owning ten percent of a booming steel mill and one hundred percent of a thriving textile mill would have been enough to satisfy me. But such was far from being the case. Men are never mediocre because they lack the will to power: they are mediocre because they cannot forge ahead of their civilizations. On my own world, I had been small potatoes indeed; on this one, thanks to my fortuitous advanced-knowhow, I could easily become king of the hill. So maybe in my own civilization I *had* had to settle for an ill-paying teacher's post, and afterward, when war threatened and the draft caught up to me, a second-class pilotship in the New Earth Space Navy: in *this* civilization I didn't have to settle for anything. In *this* civilization I could climb right up to the top of the ladder, provided I kept my nose clear on the way and provided I kept my operations well within the framework of the religious structure.

Religious structures like the Sacred Trust of the Divine Overseer are made to order for opportunistic people like myself. The procedure for forging ahead is simple. First, you establish yourself as a devout, god-fearing citizen, then you hang a religious connotation on everything you do, all the while keeping strictly on the path of righteousness. You save every cent you can, pay your employees as little as possible, and consicuously hand out pennies to kids. People who worship selfish gods like to be treated like dirt, and they love nothing better than to have a self-made rich man walk all over them, provided said rich man's feet are free from sin. I made sure mine were.

I "invented" the gasoline engine, and not long afterward I brought forth Perfection's first automobile—the Hill Roamer. Again, I didn't try for anything fancy, but settled for a compact job that could be feasibly operated on the existent streets and avenues, and that could generally be depended upon to start up when you wanted it to and to stop when you wanted it to. I had a dozen assistants working for me by this time under the supervision of Stanch, and they in turn had assistants of their own; consequently it wasn't very long before I had a stamping plant in ac-

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tion, and an assembly plant to go with it. The lack of electrical power was a handicap of course, but the people of Perfection still weren't sufficiently sophisticated to take it in their stride, and I had decided to wait a while longer before "inventing" it. Let them get used to my automobile first, then I would give them electricity —and all that went with it.

MY next project was a highway construction company. Ideally, I should have built my highways before I manufactured and sold my automobiles, but in order to build highways you need to exact taxes from the people who are going to use them, and in order to get the people to suffer such an ignominy you have to make them want the highways. Hence you sell them automobiles first. To obtain the tax money I would need, I instigated with the help of Upright Smith the establishment of the "Ten Town Council". Each of the ten towns elected a patriarch-parson to represent it, whereupon Upright, whom I had helped win the Purity seat, convened the group in the capitol building which I had built in Integrity, the most centrally located of the ten towns. It was no trick at all to sell the ten representatives on the idea of connecting the towns with "hard-topped roads", but selling them on the idea of financing the venture by exacting taxes from their constituents was something else. Just the same, though, I had them beat before I even started, because they knew as well as I did that if the people wanted to drive their automobiles outside of town they were going to have to pay for the privilege out of their own pockets. The measure was enacted into law, and a tax structure was set up to levy and collect the necessary revenue.

I ran my first highway from Purity to Righteousness, then I linked Righteousness with Integrity, and Integrity with Transcendence. From Integrity, I ran a real super-duper of a job to Straight-and-Narrow-Path, after which I linked all of the coastal towns together. Finally I doubled back from Truth and Humility, the easternmost and westernmost coastal towns, to Righteousness and Transcendence respectively, and as a finishing touch I ran a six-lane turnpike from Transcendence to Purity and extended it into the forest in the direction of my mountain to a thickly wooded area where I planned on opening a lumber mill sometime in the future.

You should have seen those people take to the road. For a while I thought I was going to have another late-twentieth century U.S. on my hands—or perhaps I should say "hoped", because that was the sort of setup I

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was aiming for—but such did not prove to be the case. The people of Perfection never drove for pleasure per se. They drove only when they needed to transport themselves from point A to point B, and vice versa, or only when they needed to transport goods and materials between the two points. It was this final development that opened my eyes to an aspect of my brave new world that I had thus far overlooked: the need for mechanical freight-carriers. Getting my assistants together, I made a few changeovers in my road-building equipment plant and began turning out tractors and trailers. To light the way, I went into the trucking business myself, cleaning up a modest fortune, and after that, I couldn't manufacture tractors and trailers fast enough. No problem there: I simply built another plant. Before long, the highways started to go to pot. No problem there, either: I merely notified the Ten Town Council and started building new ones. I started an automobile factory in Righteousness, one in Prudence, and one in Discretion. I organized a petroleum refining company to replace the catch-as-catch-can arrangement I had with an oil-well drilling outfit in Transcendence. I began stringing service stations, roadside restaurants, and motels all over the land. The technological sun had at last risen over Perfection and the technological millennium was on hand. If you doubted it, all you had to do was to look at the sky over Purity during the morning and afternoon rush-hours and see the smog.

The time had come to "invent" electricity. I "invented" it.

WELL, I got into just about every industry you can think of before I finally got around to asking for Chastity's hand. I was thirty-two by then, and the richest man in Perfection. Upright and Dutiful raised no objections—indeed, they virtually threw their darling daughter on my lap—and after a special bethrothal period of six months, the marriage ceremony was performed by none other than Upright himself in the Smith homestead. By this time I had of course gotten around to building a house of my own—a slightly larger version of the standard Perfection dwelling complete with skylight-roof. After the marriage ceremony, Chastity and I retired to the woods, as was the custom, and spent the major part of our wedding night wrapped snugly in her rug-petticoat beneath the camouflaging branches of a big tree. Toward morning, we carved our initials in the trunk, reserving the tree as ours so that it should be available to us in the future; then, hand in hand, we walked through

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the forest to our new home. There, we spread our mattresses on opposite sides of the sleeping room and slept the rest of the night. Several times I awoke, and each time, I saw that evil-minded old man up there in the sky glaring down at me through the skylight-roof as though he knew exactly what had gone on beneath the concealing branches of "our" tree.

We had been married for almost a year when the recession set in. There was nothing mysterious about this new turn of affairs: the people had bought just about everything they needed, and the in-built obsolescence of my products had yet to manifest itself. Nor would it for at least another year. However, I wasn't worried, for I had anticipated just such an impasse and had gone into the production of luxury items to assist my brave new world over its first economic hurdle. In less than a week I had the establishments of my various retail merchants stocked with every manner of electrical appliance and fun product you can think of and was sitting back in my executive easy-chair waiting to enjoy the fruits of my foresight.

The fruits were not forthcoming.

I couldn't believe it at first when my merchants began phoning me (I had thrown in the telephone as a sort of bonus when I had given electricity to my brave new world) and telling me that my new products weren't moving. It is an established economic fact that consumers will buy luxuries even when doing so deprives them of the means to buy necessities, and yet these consumers of mine, all of them reasonably prosperous, all of them well-stocked up on the things they needed, and all of them unaware that their possessions were foredoomed to go on the fritz, were refusing to buy so much as a single nonessential item. What in the world had gone wrong?

I WENT on a survey trip and interviewed a dozen retail merchants chosen at random. None of them threw any light on the mystery until, quite by accident, I asked the last one I visited if *he* had bought any of the new products. To my astonishment, he replied, "No, of course not!"

"What do you mean, 'no, of course not'?" I asked. "Is there something wrong with the new products?"

"Oh no, Mr. Hill. Their excellence is in keeping with the excellence everybody has come to expect in all your products."

"Then why haven't you bought any of them?"

"Because I don't *need* them."

"But you don't have to *need* something in order to buy it. All you have to do is *want* it."

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"Oh, but I couldn't buy something simply because I *wanted* it, Mr. Hill. To do so would involve self-indulgence, and you know as well as I do that those who indulge themselves fall into disfavor with the Divine Overseer."

So *that* was it! "Then you've known all along why the new products weren't moving!" I said. "Why didn't you tell me in the first place?"

"But I didn't know, Mr. Hill. I only knew why I myself couldn't buy any of them. I'm a merchant, not a customer."

"But when you contemplate buying something, even when you contemplate buying it from yourself, you automatically become a customer—or at least a potential customer. Can't you see that?"

His mouth fell slightly ajar. "Why, I never thought of it that way before, Mr. Hill. You're right, of course. But what are we going to do?"

It was a good question. Driving back to Purity that night along one of my fine new highways, I tried desperately to answer it. The recession—or depression, to call a spade a spade—would last for at least a year, and my brave new world simply wasn't resilient enough to endure such a prolonged ordeal. Before the year was up, the people would reject the technological blessings that I had bestwoed upon them and go back to their old way of life, and I, Benjamin Hill, would be out in the cold.

Well no, not out in the cold exactly. I'd be able to save *some* of my fortune. Nevertheless, my chances of realizing my rightful destiny would be doomed.

It was midsummer, and the night was warm. All of the stars were out. The D.O. was nearly at zenith. How he managed it, I don't know, but when I looked up at him I got the impression that he was sneering at me.

Well he might. He had won after all.

Or had he?

Pulling over onto the shoulder, I parked the car and gazed up into that frowning face. At the plateau-forehead and the littoral-eyebrows. At the sea-eyes and the mountain-range nose. At the ridge-lips and the forest-cheeks. At the tundra-chin. If the corners of that grim mouth could be lifted just a hair . . . If the contour of that brooding brow could be softened ever so little.

If, indeed! "Well what are you waiting for, Benjamin Hill?" I asked. "The Fourth of July?"

I STOPPED off in Purity just long enough to pick up a few supplies and to tell Chastity that I would be gone for several more days; then I drove on through to the site of my intended lumber mill, parked my car, and set out

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for my mountain on foot. My mountain and my PT-boat . . . and my projectiles.

You see what had happened, don't you? I had said, "Come," and my brave new world had followed—up to the point where following had involved changing the image of its god. Then it had balked, and for good reason: it hadn't been able to change the image of its god.

It hadn't been able to because, unlike the images most civilizations have of their gods, this image wasn't mental. It wasn't, in the strict sense of the word, an image at all, but a concrete fact.

If you can't alter your god's visage, you can't alter his attitude either.

The people of Perfection were no different from any other kind of people. They would gladly have altered their divinity's expression to fit the changing times—if they only could have. As a matter of fact, they would have done the job some time ago, and the sociological change that was trying to take place would already have taken place, and the dark ages would have been no more. But the job, even if they had known how to go about it, was utterly beyond their capabilities.

It wasn't beyond mine.

It took me three days to reach my PT-boat. It took me two more to calculate my trajectories and to align my projective tubes. On the dawn of the sixth, I launched my projectiles. Four of them. The D.O. wasn't in the sky then, of course, but when he climbed up among the stars that night he got his comeuppance but good. A medium-megaton thermo-nuclear warhead doesn't create much of a visual display when you're watching the show from a distance of some three hundred thousand miles, and all I saw were four tiny mushrooms rising up from the Brobdingnagian face, two in the region of the eyebrows and two in the regions of the corners of the mouth. But that was enough: I knew that I had scored four direct hits.

Pretty soon, a smile appeared on the old boy's lips—not a broad smile, but a sort of Gioconda smile. The brooding aspect of the brow became rapidly less acute, and gradually the austere expression transmuted to one of gentle firmness. It was exactly the sort of change I had wanted—one subtle enough to escape the people's awareness on the conscious, but not on the unconscious, level. My brave new world was saved.

Standing on the mountainside, I looked out over the promised land and raised my arms. "Let there be light!" I said.

THREE more days passed before I got back to Purity. I

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drove through the evening streets and avenues, wondering if my face-lifting job had had any effect yet. The town was bright with the radiance of the electric street lamps that I had had installed on every corner, but save for an occasional married couple on their way to the forest, I saw no one.

I wasn't disappointed. I knew it was too soon to expect results. *Zeitgeists* die hard.

Still and all, though, I reflected, there ought to be some sign somewhere that this one was on its way out.

There was, but I didn't find it in the streets. I shouldn't have looked for it there in the first place. I found it in my own house. On the buffet-cupboard. In the form of a combination electric can-opener and knife-sharpener.

"I—I saw it in Affable Gray's store this morning and I just couldn't resist buying it," Chastity said. "I—I hope you don't mind, Benjamin."

I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her through the narrow opening of her bonnet. "Mind? Sweetheart, I love you for it!" I said.

* * *

The next morning, my Righteousness distributor phoned and told me that my new line of merchandise was beginning to move. I received a similar call that afternoon from my Discretion distributor. Checking on the Purity end of the business, I learned that Chastity had been far from the only consumer to succumb to the temptation of my irresistible items, and that sales were increasing by the hour. The depression, clearly, was being put to rout.

I had already "invented" radio. Now, the psychological moment had arrived for my greatest "invention" of all: television. I got busy and "invented" it.

Naturally, I had to set up a TV station, but this proved to be no problem. Once I had it in operation, I put Stanch in charge of popular programming and handed over the educational programming to Upright, with the suggestion that he choose several of Perfection's most capable patriarch-parsons and let them dispense their knowledge on a country-wide, rather than on a familial, scale. He was amenable to the idea, and he even agreed to plug an experimental technological institute that I had recently begun building in Prudence.

Chastity bore me a son. A year later, she bore me a daughter.

As more and more people bought automobiles and began driving them for pleasure, traffic increased, and as a consequence, more highways had to be built, not to mention more service stations, more motels, and more roadside restaurants. To keep the

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economic ball rolling, I instituted seven annual fun days and timed them so that they appeared at regular intervals on the Gregorian-based calendar which I had previously introduced, and calculated their occurrence in such a way that they always fell either on a Friday or on a Monday. Thus far, I had functioned as a sort of one-man progress-concern; now, however, as the Perfectians began to shed their naïveté, I began to have competition. An eponymous patriarch-parson named Forward Townson opened a country-wide chain of roadside restaurants; a young man named Goodwill Furrow went into the farm-machinery business and began turning out tractors and combines; and Strongwill Dimity made a comeback in the women's garment industry by employing the same mass-production techniques that had brought about his downfall. This was only the beginning.

The Ten Town Council functioned effectively enough for a while, enacting this piece of legislation and that as the need arose; but, as time passed and the socio-economic structure grew more and more complex, it became increasingly apparent that a larger governing body under the guidance of a single individual was needed. In a word, the moment had arrived for me to get myself elected president. I set up the necessary political machinery and got myself voted into office for a term of six years.

BENJAMIN, Jr. was nine by this time, and Little Chastity was eight. Chastity was a mature and beautiful woman of thirty-two. I built a White House in Integrity, and the four of us moved into it. After we were settled, I convened the representatives whom I had gotten elected along with me, and the cabinet leader whom I had appointed; then I called in my presidential advisor, Stanch Meadows, and the bunch of us got busy and enacted the legislation and set up the judicial system necessary to keep our lusty young society from hoisting itself by its own petard. In addition, we streamlined Perfection's cumbersome monetary system and levied sufficient taxes to balance the new federal budget. I had grown a beard quite some time ago, and now I was glad that I had, for it lent me the dignity that my new position called for. In fact, it even made me look a little bit like Abraham Lincoln.

Benjamin, Jr. liked living in the White House. So did Little Chastity. As for Chastity, she adored the place. I hadn't tried for an exact facsimile of the pre WW-III U.S. job; nevertheless, there was a striking resemblance between the two structures, just as there was a striking resem-

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blance between my brave new civilization and the civilization that had existed in late twentieth-century U.S. prior to the War and the Interregnum. However, as I've stated earlier in these memoirs, this was the sort of setup I was aiming for. Nor was I sticking my neck out, as you might at first think. I had "invented" electricity and I had "invented" the gasoline motor—yes—and I had even "invented" gun powder; but there was one form of power which I had not "invented" and which I had no intention of "inventing", and that was atomic energy. *My* brave new world had no Achilles' heel.

One thing that had bugged me for a long time was the matter of fashions. Women still dressed exactly the way they had dressed before the technological revolution, and so did men. Prior to my election to the presidency, I had been powerless to do anything about this stubborn adherence to the past; now, however, I was powerless no longer. "Chastity," I said one day, "take that ridiculous bonnet off your head and do something about your hair!"

At first she was shocked, but after I explained to her that as the wife of the President of Perfection she had a moral obligation to establish precedence, she was enthusiastic about the idea—so enthusiastic, in fact, that I had to tone down some of her suggestions and rule out others. The change, I told her, would have to be gradual—the abandonment of the camouflage-bonnet first, and the creation of a conservative coiffeur; then slight alterations in the tepee-dress, and so on. "And while you're subtly influencing women's fashions," I added, "I'll be subtly influencing men's."

We couldn't miss. Oh, there were a few diehards who clung to the old ways—there always are; but the vast majority of the people imitated us like chimpanzees. Bonnets disappeared. So did knee-length frock coats. Tepees went off the market, and so too, eventually, did rolled-rug petticoats. People began looking like people, and the garment industry boomed. Ironically, Strongwill Dimity profited the most, broadening out into men's clothing and becoming a millionaire almost overnight. But that was all right—he had as much right to make money as anyone else had. What annoyed me was his going into the distillery industry soon afterward and flooding my brave new world with cheap whiskey. Some people are never satisfied no matter how much money they make.

Otherwise, matters proceeded smoothly. My extra-official activities paid off handsomely and my popularity increased. At the end of my first six-year term, I was

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re-elected with only a token of resistance, and my brave new world took another giant step forward in the direction of the Millennium.

The Millennium indeed! Sometimes when I look back on my hopes and expectations, I am tempted to laugh.

At other times, I am tempted to cry.

THE fact that a person of Strongwill Dimity's puritanical character had invoked the Demon Rum in order to make a fast buck should have cued me that Perfection was no longer quite as perfect as it once had been. So should the fact that the crimes now being committed by the citizenry could no longer be classified as minor misdemeanors as had been the case in less sophisticated times, and the concomitant fact that the Righteousness Penitentiary—Perfection's only prison—was not large enough to keep pace with the mounting crime-wave. None of these inconsistencies, however, rang a bell, nor did the need of my judicial system to enact legislation relative to divorce proceedings, nor the appearance upon the scene of juvenile delinquency. What finally pulled my head down from the clouds and brought me face to face with reality was venality in my cabinet, and probably even this wouldn't have done the trick if the offender had been someone other than my Secretary of Health and Education—old Upright Smith himself. A construction-company operator feathered the old man's nest to the tune of two hundred thousand credits, in return for which Upright handed the company a contract to build four new technological institutes at a cost far in excess of what the job was worth. When I heard about the transaction, I couldn't believe at first that my informer was telling me the truth.

Well, I hushed the matter up. What else could I do? When you go in for nepotism, you have to go in for it all the way. As for Upright, I gave him a good talking to, and I think that right there was when I really tumbled to the fact my brave new world was on the sick list. For, instead of hanging his head and showing contrition, the old man looked me straight in the eye as though his conscience was as clear as could be, and just before he left the room, he gave me a knowing wink.

I was tempted to follow him and make it clear that I hadn't said what I'd said merely because my position had demanded that I say it, but because I had meant it, but for the life of me, I couldn't get up out of my chair. I was stunned.

I don't know how long I sat

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there before volition returned, but it must have been a good hour, because late afternoon had been in attendance when I had called Upright in, and now, darkness lay upon the White House lawn. A pair of French windows opened onto the patio, and I slipped outside, hopeful that a deep breath or two of the wintry air would clear my mind and enable me to isolate the cause of my father-in-law's illogical abandonment of the pedestal of righteousness upon which he had posed for over three-quarters of a century. But the wintry air did nothing for me whatsoever, and I stood there on the patio as numbly as I had sat behind the presidential desk.

I don't know what made me look up at the D.O., unless it was the striking pattern which the sharp shadows of the trees had cut upon the argent, snow-covered grounds. Since inflicting my "face-job" on him, I hadn't looked at him a dozen times, and even on those occasions I hadn't really seen him. I saw him this time, though. He was beaming warmly down at me, and his lips were curved in a big friendly grin. "Go to it, pal," his expression seemed to say, "do anything you want to. I'll forgive you for it, no matter what it is." I nearly fell off the patio.

You see what had happened, don't you? In making their alterations on the old boy's physiognomy, my projectiles had precipitated a tectonic revolution, and the revolution had continued, and was still continuing, the alterations which the projectiles had begun. The process hadn't been, and wasn't, rapid—at least from the standpoint of an observer stationed three hundred thousand miles away, and as a consequence none of the Perfectians had noticed any change at all—consciously, that is. And as for myself, I had noticed the change now only because my indifference to the old boy had resulted in my virtually ignoring him for years.

No wonder my brave new world had developed stomach ulcers. No wonder old Upright had stepped voluntarily down from his pedestal. No wonder husbands and wives were facing up to the fact that they no longer liked each other and were doing something about it. No wonder crime was on the rise. No wonder punishment was not being exacted. The frown on that face up there had been everybody's conscience. It had been the policeman around the corner. It had represented authority, and no man-made authority could ever take its place.

The "plastic-surgery" which I had performed had tempered that authority somewhat, but it hadn't destroyed that authority. Granted, the D.O.'s face had developed

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an expression of gentleness immediately after my Projectiles had done their work; nevertheless, it still had retained sufficient firmness to keep the people in line. "Indulge yourselves a little," the new face had said. "Live it up a little. *But don't forget,*" it had added, *"that I'll still be watching you."*

And now, it said—Well, I've already told you what it said.

I went back into the White House and got a bottle of Strongwill Dimity's whiskey out of the kitchen cupboard. I poured myself a stiff jolt and drank it off. "So what do you do now, Benjamin Hill?" I asked.

I didn't answer.

BUT I didn't give up either. I tried all sorts of measures. I instituted a togetherness campaign in an attempt to cut down on the divorce rate. The divorce rate multiplied. I started girls' clubs, boys' clubs, and youth hostels in each of the ten towns in an attempt to keep the kids off the streets. Juvenile delinquency doubled. I added specially designed courses of study to the curricula of my technological institutes in the hope of cutting down on promiscuity. Promiscuity tripled. I established the Perfection Bureau of Investigation in an endeavor to curb crime. Crime crescendoed. And all the while I did these things, that indulgent old man up there in the sky grinned ever more widely and ever more forgivingly.

As time passed, my inability to cope with the monster I had innocently created reduced me to a state of comatose bewilderment, and after a while I began to wonder which was the potter and which was the pot—whether the change in the D.O.'s expression was affecting the morality of the people, or whether the change in the morality of the people was affecting the D.O.'s expression. Regardless of which viewpoint I chose to take, the end result remained the same: moral decay.

I had planned on serving a third term, and then retiring. However, the third term never materialized. Strongwill Dimity, who had shed his political naïveté with more alacrity than his contemporaries had, organized a party called the Poor People's Protectorate and got himself elected on a platform that promised social security, parity, unemployment insurance, lower taxes, higher wages, and free medical care. Chastity, "Little" Chastity, Benjamin, Jr., and myself moved out of the White House and returned to our home in Purity. Stanch came with us, while Upright and Dutiful Smith moved into the big mansion which the old man had built in Righteousness with the taxpayers' money.

I began writing my memoirs.

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In order to enable myself to get down on paper a first-hand account of the new *Zeitgeist*, I left my family in Stanch's care and set out on a tour of the ten towns. A single example of what I found in each instance should suffice to point up the general *status quo*:

In Righteousness, a fifty-two year old patriarch-parson was convicted of raping a twelve-year old girl and given a two-year suspended sentence.

In Truth, a blind woman was stoned to death by her neighbors because she accused them of behaving like swine. None of the neighbors were indicted.

In Prudence, three teenage girls were arrested for soaping obscene pictures on automobile windshields and were taken into night court. The judge reprimanded the arresting officer for being too strait-laced, dismissed the charge, slipped the girls a credit apiece, and told them to go out and have a good time.

In Straight-and-Narrow-Path, a fisherman turned his boat into a bawdy house and made more money in one month than he had made in all the previous months of his life put together.

In Discretion, a patriarch-parson murdered another patriarch-parson whom he found in bed with his wife. The judge who tried the case sentenced him to twenty-years, and then suspended it.

In Virtue, eight women clubbed a taxi-driver to death with their spiked heels because he couldn't fit all of them into his cab. Each of them received a suspended six-month sentence.

In Humility, two youthful scientists used a five-year old boy in a dissection experiment that cost him his life. They were given a year apiece in the Righteousness Penitentiary.

In Integrity, Strongwill Dimity and his fellow-"protectors" voted themselves a handsome raise in salary and augmented it with an equally handsome increase in their expense accounts.

In Transcendence, a woman neglected her three children to the extent that two of them died of malnutrition. The case never came to court.

In Purity, a young man named Benjamin Hill, Jr. broke into Affable Gray's store, sprung the strong box, and took off with nine thousand credits for parts unknown.

I HEADED straight for home the minute the chief of police told me the news. I threw open the door. "Chastity!" I called.

Chastity didn't answer, but "Little" Chastity did. She was entertaining her latest boy friend on the living room bench, and both of them were stoned. It made me sick just to look at her. "You're out of luck, dad-buddy,"

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she said. "She ran away with Stanch."

I seized her shoulders and shook her. "That's not true!"

"Oh, but it is true, dad-buddy. And why shouldn't it be? It's high time you came down out of the clouds and looked around.

I slapped her. She laughed at me. I ran out of the house.

I looked up at the face of the D.O. It bore a pronounced leer now, and the right eye was contracted in such a way that the old boy seemed to be delivering a knowing wink. The over-all expression suggested complete corruption. All I could think of was the picture of Dorian Gray.

Spades should be called spades. This was not the picture of Dorian Gray. This was the picture of Perfection—and the "artist" was Benjamin Hill.

Fortunately, the "artist" still had a quantity of "pigment" left.

* * *

I was growing old. It took me four days to reach my PT-boat this time. Two more to get ready. Three to go . . .

Look, I'm not saying that a stern god is the answer to mankind's problems. I don't know the answer to mankind's problems. I only know that a stern god comes closer to being the answer than a tolerant god does.

I let the remaining projectiles loose, and they wailed up from the mountainside like four angry banshees. I waited all day. Evening came, and that old roué climbed up into the sky. One, two, three, four. The smile disappeared. The wink was no more. Volcanic action took over, seas squirmed. Ridge-lips turned downward into a dour line. A frown so deep and dark and brooding that it bordered on being a scowl settled on the vast face, and it settled there for keeps. Chastity would be back in no time. So would my son.

So would the dark ages.

I didn't care. I raised my arms. "Let there be night!" I said.

(*Continued from page 67*)

time that will be alloted me; the choice, though, of a short and magnificent life selling igloos on Mercury has its appeal. I believe that you, also, are fascinated by impossibilities. (And remember what happened to Troy?)

Therefore, I shall time the solid postal transmissions in a few moments and transport myself accordingly. By the time you have read this far I shall be but moments away.

Please consider the future, and please be afraid. In a few moments you too, shall meet the Butcher. He is probably outside now, with a ring for you.

Open the door and let him in.

Love and kisses,
Solomon/Scarle

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MATING SEASON

By WILTON G. BEGGS

Arnalla was a violent world. But no more so than the violence that remained hidden in the hearts of men—and women.

"IN less than a month," Mary Gibbs whispered, hating the circling beasts. "Thank God I won't be alive to see it again."

Mary had awaked only moments before, but the twin Arnalla suns were already hot above the jungle fronds. The sky was harsh and metallic, a bilious green inverted over a rank world of silence. Through a window Mary watched the gray creatures wheeling in the distance.

Their movements had a nightmarishly somnolent quality. The huge, leathery wings flapped so slowly that it seemed the beasts would lose momentum, and fall into the smoking lake beneath them. There were no placid cries, no calling to one another. The animals of Arnalla had not risen above a semireptile stage of evolution. They were voiceless, except during the mating season, when the females' screams pervaded the jungles from pole to pole.

"Devils." Mary rose painfully from the sweat-soaked bed. Taking her dress off the back of a chair she slipped the rotting material over her head. She swayed as she worked. "In less than a month the'yll make this planet even more a hell."

Mary had witnessed the spectacle ten times, but she had never accepted it. The thing was too ghastly, too insane. It was in no way like the animal courtships of Earth.

"Why are the females the aggressors?" Mary had asked her husband that first year, ten years ago, while the colonists were still living in the wrecked spaceship that had brought them to Arnalla. She had cowered with the others, awed by the raging hor-

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ror outside, waiting for an end to the weeks of death.

"Arnalla isn't Earth, darling," James had said back then, his handsome face untroubled by the shrieking, and the guts and blood on the transparent portholes. "It's a different world, but this is basically the old story of the survival of the fittest. The strong females kill off the weaklings. That way, only the best eggs are laid."

Mary had accepted this explanation of the annual carnage during her first season on the planet. She did not accept it later. Often, she had noticed, some battle-scarred veteran would become so fierce that she lived for years. Too old for egg-laying, the veterans killed hundreds of healthy but inexperienced young females before they finally drowned in their own blood. From the safety of the spaceship, where the colonists took refuge each mating period, Mary had seen these aged murderesses killing right and left for days on end. It was as if the ancient beasts were determined to annihilate their entire race.

"They are as I am," Mary said dully, staring at the once-pretty face in the mirror beside her bed. She held up her pale hands, from which the flesh seemed in the process of melting away. "But where are my claws and fangs?"

She sighed and looked out at the far-off, circling beasts. Though not the largest of Arnalla's animals, they were gigantic creatures, with wingspreads of at least thirty feet. From the armor-plated dragons of the northern seas, to the jungle behemoths, all the animals of Arnalla were monsters. Even the swamp vegetarians possessed crocodilian teeth and claws of iron.

"They have to be terrible," her husband, James, had told Mary long ago. "No defenseless group could survive the mating. The madness hits every animal at the same time, on the same indefinite day. The males are always weaker. After performing their duty they are immediately killed. For several weeks the females will attack anything that moves. Most of them die in combat, and the victors lay millions of eggs. The new generation hatches with incredible swiftness. By the end of the Arnallan year the youngsters are full-grown. The planet teems with life, and the cycle is repeated."

Mary shuddered, turning away from the window. This morning the pain in her stomach blazed with the force of lightning. She bent double. She moaned as the agony became more intense.

A door opened, the rusted hinges screeching. "Darling?" Mary's husband strode to her across the warped floor. Glowing with health he lifted her in his muscular arms. He was naked,

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for the majority of the colonists had stopped wearing clothes after their third year on Arnalla. The humid, hot atmosphere ruined cloth, shredded it, made the briefest skirt or trousers sticky and uncomfortable. Mary was of the few who had refused to discard the rotting Earthian garments.

"Are you ill again, darling?" James's sun-bronzed face was concerned. "I wanted you to sleep as long as possible. Last night . . . Perhaps I shouldn't have . . ."

Mary put her wasted fingers over her husband's mouth. "Don't apologize. You hadn't treated me like a woman for such a long time."

She started to say more, then bit her colorless lips. She did not blame him because his love-making had been born of guilt rather than of desire. Held against his deep chest Mary could almost feel the vibrant life pounding through her husband's hard young body.

It is not his fault, she told herself grimly.

The pain eased, and Mary stood up, using James's arm for support. "I wonder why it's progressing so slowly. I just hang on, don't I? The others went faster. They . . ."

"Don't," said her husband. "Don't, darling."

Mary smiled sadly, thinking of the others. They, too, had contracted this Arnallan disease without a name, this strange sickness the hostile climate produced. They, too, had experienced pain, and had lingered until they were shells of their former selves. Then they had died, and not any of the medical knowledge brought with the colonists from Earth had eased that dying by one iota.

"You've not been resting enough lately," James said, forcing a cheerful tone. "You're . . ."

"Of course I can't rest!" The anguished words were out before Mary could dam them back. "Don't you think I know what's in your mind?"

They glared at each other a moment, wildly, miserably. The twin suns were beating upon the room. It was being changed into an oven. Perspiration darkening her dress Mary ran to the window. Her arms were outstretched, as if in homage to the winged obscenities circling in the bilious green sky.

"They would understand," she said, choking. "Those scarred old demons would understand how I feel."

Far below Mary, a few hundred feet beyond a strip of jungle, the lake shore began. A stone pier jutted into the water down directly opposite the window. A dugout was tied to the pier. The bubbling surface of the lake was hazy with smoke.

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"I'm sorry," Mary said after a while, gaining control of herself. "The approach of the mating season always sets me on edge." Shielding her eyes she could barely see the great spaceship through the smoke. Rusted and stained it sat upright where the colonists had crash-landed ten years before, on a small volcanic island out in the lake. "Susan and I are going over this morning to prepare the quarters for this year's refuge. I'm too weak for the heavy tasks, but she wants me to show her where the cleaning utensils are."

Mary swung about. She stared at her husband, daring him to speak, begging him mutely. He blanched beneath the golden tan. His mouth opened, but no sound came forth.

They left the room and went into the upstairs hall of the immense house. The big, rambling building had been erected by the colonists during their first months on the planet, before they recognized the trap into which they had plunged themselves. There had been one hundred of them then, the original number. Few of them were over thirty at the time, and they had built grandly, for the future, for the overflow of babies expected within the next decade.

"I hate the house," Mary said, leaning on James as they walked toward a staircase at the end of the long hall. "To me it is the symbol of our failure in this awful world." Desolation lay on both sides of her. All the generous rooms by which she and her husband passed were empty of people, the handmade furniture moldy and mildewed, gaping doors fallen inward, or hanging by a rusted hinge. "On Earth it would have taken a century to make this havoc. But Arnalla! Arnalla is Hell!"

They went down the creaking stairs carefully, avoiding the steps ready to give way under a heavy weight. Sometimes it seemed to Mary that nothing they had built on this planet, or brought with them, had lasted more than a score of weeks. Something in the air, something in the exhalation of the very soil, hastened all forms of decay and death. The colonists' powerful weapons and work tools had worn out years ago, though everything of this sort had been almost indestructible on Earth.

"I wish I had died with my mother and father," Mary said bitterly. "Don't you wish we had lived in dignity, until the bombs fell?"

Her husband lowered his head, but made no reply, and Mary realized he did not wish the thing at all. Dreadful as Arnalla was, he clung to his life. For some reason he thrived in the malevolent atmosphere. He accepted each de-

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gradation, the hunger and fear, the Adamic nudity, the advancing loss of every vestige of Earthian civilization. He accepted, and he had bloomed while the others wilted and perished.

Mary remembered James's excitement on the day far in the past when the famous explorer, Enno Arnal, invited them to be among his settlers on this bizarre world. "Think of it!" James had exulted to her that evening. "My family's old friend has stumbled upon the only hospitable planet besides Earth that man has found in the Galaxy. He wants us to go. He needs strong young men and girls. Marry me, darling. Give our children a chance. I'm certain the next war is going to wipe out the human race on Earth."

So Mary had married the boy she loved, not because she believed Earth doomed, but because he would have gone without her if she had refused him. She was eighteen, and he barely twenty, and the tears of her parents had been forgotten during the long, long honeymoon through space.

"Anral promised us so much," Mary said, struggling for her breath at the foot of the moldering staircase. "But I've stopped hating him, James. I envy Arnal, that the beasts snatched him away before we stopped hoping."

She chuckled without humor, remembering how the optimistic young settlers had maintained their high spirits after their leader was killed by a lake cacodemon during the first mating season. After the sickness began, and the crashed spaceship proved unrepairable, they had still hoped. Even after the tools and weapons fell apart in their hands, their hope had remained, and even after they were reduced to hunting food with spears and axes. In the beginning they expected the overdue ships that were to bring fresh supplies and new people. Then, when four years of wretchedness slipped by, and five, and six, the remnant left alive had searched the green sky just for a rescue vessel to take them off the planet of death.

No ship came, however, and finally the shrinking emigrant band had experienced the full horror of their abandonment. They could question no further whether the ultimate war which must not happen, had happened, or whether the rockets which must never be loosed, had obliterated the cities of Earth. They the dying prisoners of Arnalla, were the last human beings alive in the universe.

"It seems incredible yet," Mary said, as she and James walked across the rubble covering the ground floor of the house. Through a hole in a wall created by some night monster, she could see a girl bending over a

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fuming cook fire. The girl was nude, and no more than sixteen by the Earthian age scale. She was auburn-haired and very pretty. "You and I and Susan. The last of our kind anywhere, James."

The girl glanced up on hearing Mary's voice. She waved artlessly, but Mary did not miss the unspoken signal that sang between the nubile child and the man. The pain and nausea of her illness rose in Mary like a sword. She fought it sternly, sorrowfully amused by her husband's boyish expression of lust.

No effort had been made in years at keeping the ground floor repaired. The big room Mary and he traversed was filthy with a brown, noisome fungus. It was spread across the boards like a carpet. Pulpy bunches of the blight reared in balls upon the crumbling tables and chairs. Mary and James went outside into a tiny area of packed dirt beside the house.

"Breakfast," the naked child said, turning a rickety spit slowly over the fire. She removed a lump of meat gingerly, and handed it to James. The greasy mass was half-raw. He tore it with his gleaming teeth. Mary declined her portion, shaking her head and shoving her trembling fists deep inside the pockets of her sweat-dampened dress.

"Aren't you hungry?" Juice trickled down the girl's dimpled chin as she ate. "James may not kill anything today."

Mary leaned against the house wall. "It doesn't matter." The exterior of the building was tortured to the roof by a thick mat of blackish, mosslike plants. Mary rested against the rubbery substance gratefully. "After the weapons ruined, and it became so difficult to get our food, I used to be starved all the time. But the sickness takes care of that. Like the others, I've lost my appetite."

Instinctively the girl and the man looked behind them into the tangle of primitive trees and ferns and vines abounding toward the west. In that direction lay the cemetery. It was submerged by the sultry wilderness, but once the region about the house had been cleared for miles. The clearing had extended to the beast barrier that had kept animals away except during the insanity of the mating season. Now the barrier was inoperative, and the jungle was tightening a noose about the building, pushing at it everywhere with mushrooming varieties of trees and ferns that grew several inches in a single day.

"Are you ready to help me at the ship?" the girl said to Mary with a cordiality ludicrous in its falseness. "I don't think we should wait about preparing for the annual move. The rage may

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hit the beasts early this year. Those metal doors will look good to us in a couple of weeks."

James shuffled his bare feet uncomfortably, and Mary resisted an urge to slap the pretty, lying face. "Really, Susan," she said, "one would think you're afraid."

Mary knew this was not the case. Susan was fearless. Often, when some lake or jungle animal invaded the ground floor at night, the girl left the safety of the upper apartments and accompanied James down the stairs to scare the creature away with nothing but flickering torches.

Susan had been the only child among the colonists on the flight to Arnalla, and she scarcely remembered Earth. Following the early death of her parents the new planet had become her natural home. She had entered adolescence in excellent health, untouched by the misfortunes overwhelming her elders. James alone matched her in determination to carve out some sort of future for themselves despite all odds. He and she seemed physically immune to the effects of the inhuman struggle and the poisonous air.

"A wounded swamp dragon was on yonder side of the lake yesterday," James said, sorely ill at ease. He bit his lip and looked vaguely toward the east. "If it's weak enough, maybe I can get some more meat for us."

Mary watched the naked pair intently. She was struck, not for the first time, by a dazed sensation that she was dead already, that this graceful man and girl were a latter-day Adam and Eve, and Arnalla the hellish Eden from which another tribe of reptilious brutes would eventually spring. Again she caught a flash of understanding leaping between the two, as James turned to go.

Mary was not certain how long her husband and Susan had been lovers. The affair stretched back some months, toward the death of Lois Jones, the ninety-seventh human victim of Arnalla. Lois was of the older colonists, and she had mothered the child at night, when the four of them were alone in the upstairs apartments they shared with ninety-six ghosts and Lois's bright memories of a Texas childhood. Afterwards, the drawling Southern voice silenced forever, Mary had grieved for Susan.

"We must be gentle," she had told James many times in the weeks that followed. "We recall our Earthian happiness. Susan was too young. She knows nothing but this torment."

Mary had not realized until much later that the girl was contented with her lot. Only when the initial stages of the familiar sickness had fastened upon Mary, and she would awake in the mid-

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dle of the night to find James absent from their bed, did she begin to suspect the betrayal in Susan's room down the hall. She examined the girl through different eyes then. What she found had alarmed Mary as no beast of Arnalla ever had. In Susan, Mary saw the first truly Arnallan woman, physically desirable to any virile man, but a woman devoid of conscience. A soulless female as cold-blooded in her passions as the semireptiles of the Arnallan jungles.

"I'll walk with you a little way, James," Mary said tensely. He was picking up his hunting ax from a crude bench beside the fire. By endless polishing they managed to keep the blade partially free of rust. "I want to be with you this morning. Perhaps I'll not see you again."

She said the quick sentence purposely, to test them. Their reaction showed her beyond any lingering doubt that she was not mistaken. She heard Susan's startled gasp, and James had almost dropped the ax. He was stupid with confusion, his cheeks reddening, the sleek muscles of his torso strained and taut.

"I always worry when you track for food," Mary continued, as if unaware of the consternation she had provoked. "I'm afraid you'll be killed someday."

James relaxed, the flush draining from his face. "There's no real danger just before the mating. All of them are sluggish till the madness hits."

Even then Mary did not blame him. An intolerable burden was on her heart, but no hatred. He had loved her once with the affection of an idealistic young bridegroom. She had never forgotten his tenderness; she could not condemn him now. She knew the prime mover in the plot against her was not he.

"Don't go far, Mary," Susan said anxiously. "We should cross to the island before the noon geysers boil. It's going to take at least until nightfall to get the compartments ready for occupancy."

Mary gazed at the mature child with genuine sadness, thinking of the naive high-school belle Susan would likely have been at this age, in the old days. Whatever Earth might have produced, it would not have been this lovely and precocious fiend.

They went down the steep slope together, away from the black and rotting building. At a number of places James hacked out a path for them through the undergrowth that had shot up during the night. Overhead, the twisting, evil-smelling ferns rose in a canopy eighty feet thick. They shut out any trace of light. Everywhere there was a pall of silence in a world without birds or insects.

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Under the burning suns again, Mary and James left Susan stamping her feet impatiently beside the stone pier. The two of them walked slowly off, along the strip of sand between the jungle edge and the smoky water of the lake. Steam rose about them, pushing up from fissures leading downward into the bowels of the planet. The pain was so cruel, and Mary's legs trembled so much that she feared her husband would notice, but he was preoccupied in his own misery.

She did not speak until a backward thrust of the lake had hidden them from Susan at the pier. "I can't go farther," she said, taking his hand and holding it to her breast. She stared at him wearily, thinking how beautiful he was, his long-lashed eyes downcast, the moistness weaving ringlets in his curly hair. "Let me rest a minute, James. Then do you wish me to go back to her? To Susan?"

Once more he started and glared at her wildly. He groaned, and suddenly, without warning, she was comforting him in her wasted arms as though he were a bewildered child. Through a gathering mist of agony she took the ax from his grasp. He shut his eyes and sank upon his knees before her. The angry sound of masculine weeping hung heavily on the clouded air.

"It's Arnalla." Inch by inch Mary raised the ax to her shoulder. "Arnalla poisons everything. I've known for a week Susan intends to murder me at the ship today."

"God," said the man. "Oh, god!" His broad back was twitching beneath the scourge of her words, and he buried his face in her dress. At first Mary thought he would beg forgiveness, but when he spoke she knew he was lost to her for eternity. "You'll live too long," he said thickly. "You'll live into the mating season, and be in our way. Time is so short. Each year is precious. Don't you see, darling? Susan and I are the only chance our race has left. Why is it she and I alone have escaped the sickness? It's because Arnalla has accepted us, somehow. If our babies are conceived during the proper procreative season, we're convinced the planet will spare them, and gradually alter and absorb their descendants into her scheme of life."

Above Mary the twin suns were blotted out by a flapping leather wing. She looked up, and saw a trio of filthy, lizard-headed monsters circling in the sky. They were not dangerous, with the mating orgy so near, but she shuddered nevertheless. Two were young, male and female, but the third was a nightmare of sterility and scars and grinning teeth.

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"When the madness strikes," Mary said to James quietly, "the barren one will kill both of them before an egg is laid. In her own poor witless way she'll try to rob this planet of its powers. And she'll be right, for Arnalla is Hell, and the Arnallan way of existence should be opposed by any method possible."

The man pushed away from Mary abruptly, and his handsome face was crazed and stubborn. "No!" he said, admiring the beasts in the sky. "Arnalla is our adopted mother. No matter what she does to my offspring, I know they'll owe her their gift of life."

Dark visions burst at Mary then, specters of the future bubbling in her frightened brain like the water in the lake. "The human race?" she cried, loathing him at last. "Can we not welcome doomsday possessing the souls and the minds and bodies of our ancestors? Would you let Earth's noblest achievement grovel finally on all fours, in the ooze?"

He was beginning to straighten himself distrustfully when she hit him with the ax. It was a surprising blow, swifter and stronger than she had any reason to demand of her feeble frame. He gave a barking scream as he slumped forward. She struck him twice more, and the blood concealed his expression of pain and incredulity.

"The only way," Mary said, stumbling blindly. "The human way!"

She kissed her husband's hands and spread sand over the crimson mask that had been his countenance. With infinite tiredness she sat down on a slimy boulder near him. Heat shimmered along the ground. The humid jungle was behind her, the lake in front, and steam rose around the stone on every side. In the air three shadows wheeled, the oldest beast rising and falling between the unscarred youngsters.

"I am a daughter of Earth," Mary said softly, addressing the entire, listening planet. "And a jealous woman. And my mother's priceless children will never belong to you."

She waited, calm and resolute. She fought grimly each time the pain flamed at her in an attempt to block her from the kindness she must now perform. Soon Susan would come to investigate the prolonged absence. Mary held the ax ready in her lap.

THE END

"Savage Pellucidar," a Never-Before-Published Novelet by Edgar Rice Burroughs will be featured in the November AMAZING, on sale October 10. Don't miss it.

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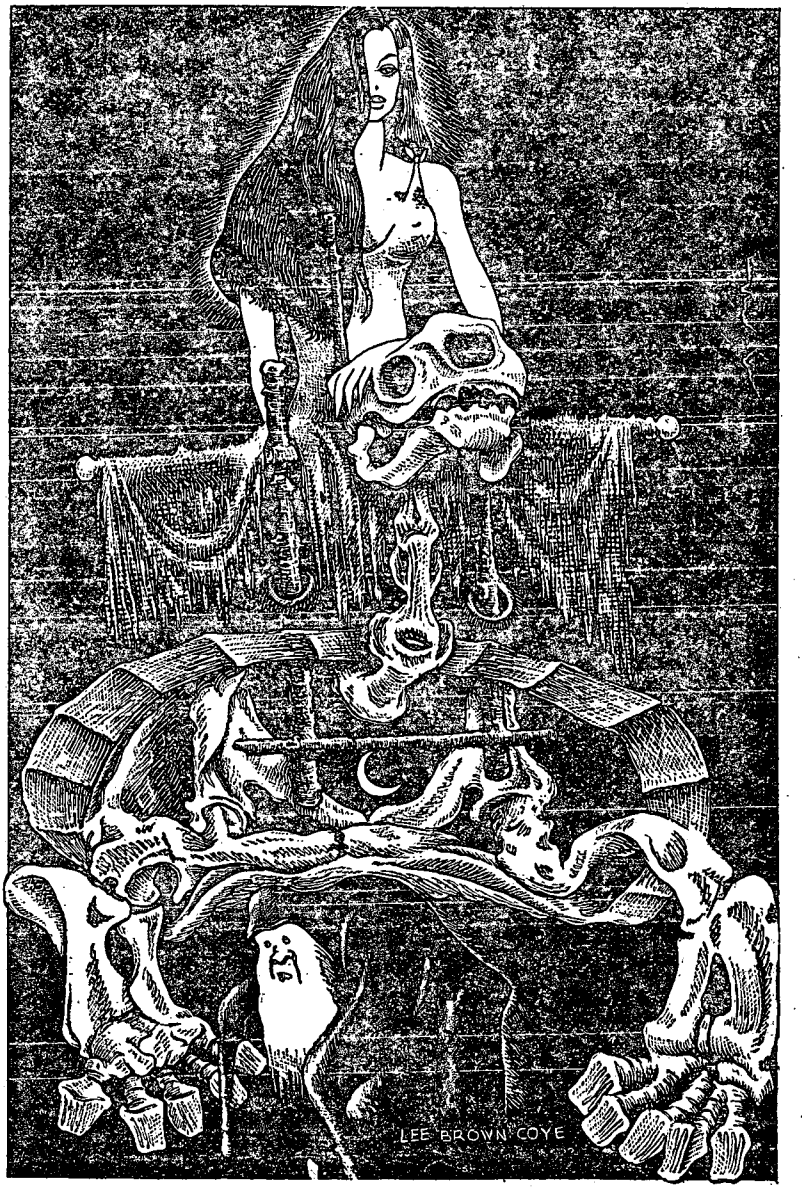

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In the pre-dawn hours the old man scoured the city to find a worshipper for the goddess he loved.

a NIGHT with HECATE

By EDWARD W. LUDWIG

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SHE awoke slowly, as if from a thousand-year sleep. Out of the dark vacuity of consciousness came the single thought:

"I am alive. I still exist."

She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids were frozen shut. She tried to open her mouth in anticipation of speech. Her lips seemed fused and as dry as ancient, sun-baked leather.

Out of the black silence came a voice, a humming-bird drone, far away:

"Awake, mighty Hecate . . . oh, gods of wind, fire and pain . . . by the heart of Astaroth, the tongue of Asmodius, awake . . . *per vota nostra, ipse nunc surgat nobilis dicatus Hecatè!*"

The muted words of the chant were as tiny fingers of warmth touching the witch-goddess, dispelling the clouds of forgetfulness. The fingers seemed to caress her face, opening her dark, black-browed eyes, giving softness and warmth to red, sensuous lips.

She became aware of a soft breeze stirring the midnight blackness of her long hair, brushing it across the clear, white flesh of face and throat. The breeze teased at the edges of her frail robe. The garment, as delicate and light as a veil of fog, fluttered back to her shoulders so that moonlight fell upon the whiteness of her full breasts and naked body.

The voice cried, "Hecate, beautiful Hecate! You are here!"

"Yes, my children—at last."

She sucked the cold night air deep into her lungs. How wonderful it was! The familiar summons, the joyous awakening, the thrill of the magic moon and the dark sea of worshipping faces; then the wine, the throbbing beat of drums, the lusty dancing, the frenzied chants, and—most wonderful of all—Love.

"You are more beautiful than ever," said the voice, reverently. "In all the universe there is none as lovely as you."

She closed her eyes, smiling, letting the words echo through her consciousness. She stretched her arms above her head, basking in the joy of feeling alive. Then she brought her hands down, ever so slightly, over naked waist, long firm thighs, smooth white knees. She was aware of the rapid rise and fall of her breasts.

She opened her eyes, still smiling.

"Thank you, my children. I—"

She stopped, her tongue frozen. Her slow gaze fell to the clearing which should have held a choked sea of eager faces.

There was but a single face.

Just one.

It was that of old Martin. He was a sparrow-faced little man, his shaggy gray hair tumbling over his wizened features as he

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knelt before the stone altar.

She remembered. Suddenly she felt very old and very weary.

I had forgotten, she thought. *I had forgotten that I am alone. It is the year 1997, and I am alone. . . .*

DESPITE the grief that had welled up within her, she held her head high.

"Beautiful Hecate," came Martin's soft voice, "you are sad. Are you angry with me?"

Her slender body lost some of its stiffness. "No, not angry. But I do not understand your people. I do not understand why they let the old gods die."

As she spoke, a dark procession of lost faces marched through her mind. Great Dagon, lovely Diana, beautiful Venus, swift Hermes, mighty Zeus. How strong they had once been!

But those who worshipped the *other* Master had come with their holy water and their crucifixes and their edicts. Then, and by far the worst, had come the doubters, spewing forth cold logic to prove that the Elder Gods could not exist. The entire Earth had been washed with logic. It had been soaped, brushed and toileted and laid to dry in sterile sunlight.

The Elder Gods had died like leaves on an October tree, falling one by one—for without believers they could not exist.

Now only she—and the King himself, the Master of Darkness —remained.

Hecate's sad eyes turned to the sparrow-faced man. "You're a poet, Martin. You understand men. How did it happen? Why did men stop believing?"

The old man shrugged. "Perhaps my people became old. They lost their fear of the night. They told their children there was nothing to fear in a darkened room, and they lost their power to imagine. They put equations on pieces of paper and they made microscopes and telescopes. And whatever could not be explained by the equations, whatever could not be seen through the microscopes and telescopes, was cast out, ignored, explained away."

He nodded at the sky. "Men made new gods, forgetting the old. There are the new gods—the planets and stars, the silver rockets. Can the wine of Dionysus compete with the challenge of Mars? Can the joy of a Sabbat surpass the thrill of conquering Jupiter's ice seas?"

Hecate shook her dark head. "But we could have given them wealth, immortality, all the ecstacies of Earth. They had no right to forget us. Didn't they know that we can't exist unless they believe in us?"

Martin didn't answer.

"And you," she went on, "why aren't you like the others?"

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He scratched the back of his gray, shaggy head. "Perhaps because my father and *his* father worshipped you. I was taught to believe. Too, maybe it's a kind of perverseness—my way of defying a world that has no use for a poet who writes only of ancient things."

Her face softened. She smiled at this helpless, absurd little man. A poet, a maker of dreams, living his feeble existence in a forest cabin. An exile in this drab world of 1997. Yet without his faith, she knew, the darkness would devour her as it devoured a thousand gods and goddesses before her.

SHE raised her face to the full, silver moon. Memory was strong. It was easy to imagine that this was a night of a thousand, two thousand years ago.

Yes, how clear it was! In her mind's vision she could see herself swooping down from the night sky. Behind her would be her monstrous brood—ghoulish Mormo, the poltergeist Ceropis, the thousand-shaped, donkey-footed Empusas.

She could see the steaming cauldron with its hissing hell-broth, with its wondrous odors of lizard and toad and storax and myrrh.

Down, down she would swoop, over the heads of the gape-jawed worshippers, through the swirling smoke, past the black-robed priests and their shrine of laurel boughs, across the chalked pentagram and to the great stone throne.

Then the shouting, the howling, the dancing! The wild rhythm of skin-drums, louder and louder, like a chorus of thunderous heart-beats surging up from the Earth.

The occasional figures, edging away from the light of the fire and lifting heads of silhouetted black to the full moon. The hurried disrobing, the gestures, the *changing*. Suddenly the beast howl, rising above the drum rhythms and the shrieking voices. Then the swift beast movements and the skittering away into the night.

More chants, more incantations. The hurling of rainbow powers into dancing flame. The stripping of virgins, the screams and laughter, the futile beat of hands, the pulling of soft young bodies into the shadows.

The melting of waxen images. The bleating of a black lamb, the thrust of sharp teeth. The flow of hot crimson into an altar's trench.

Out of the flames, a new arrival! Perhaps laughing Pan, his cloven hoofs tapping to the beat of drums. Perhaps, if the moon were very bright, the greatest of them all! The Master!

Upon such a moment all move-

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ment and all sound would cease. Pan and even mighty Hecate would fall prostrate, heads touching the century-worn earth. . . .

Hecate blinked. The vision faded. The priests, the worshippers, the smoke and flame dissolved into forest shadows. The shoutings, the chantings became fragile echoes carried away by the night-breeze, swept like frightened ghosts back to lost and forgotten centuries.

Gone, she thought, *gone forever.*

SHE became aware that a murmur had fallen over the forest, like the drone of an approaching rocket, far away. Abruptly, it loudened and exploded into a chorus of deep-throated, metallic growls. Vibrations traveled through the ground like invisible legs of great iron spiders. The stone throne trembled.

In the distance, hovering beneath the tree-horizon, was an ever-brightening glow of light.

"Martin! What *is* it? What's happening?"

The old man looked apologetically down at his cracked, worn shoes. "This is why I called you. The men from the city are destroying the forest. My house, your throne, the altar—all will be destroyed."

She choked. "*Why,* Martin?"

"They're going to build a new rocket port here. The forest, they say, is a waste of space."

She leaped down from the throne, eyes wild, black a whirling crown of midnight. "When will they be here?"

"V—very soon. Maybe within an hour."

She spat. "You fool! You should have called me sooner. It's been weeks since you've called me!"

"I was sick, beautiful Hecate, so sick I couldn't even leave my house. Even when they told me the house would be destroyed—"

"Silence! Without the throne and altar I, too, will be destroyed. I won't be able to come even when you call me!"

"I—I know."

She gasped. "Martin, you know I need two things in order to live: love and worship. You must help me find new disciples, men who will believe in me and love me. Only with that faith and love can I live apart from the forest and throne and altar. We must find those disciples now, before sunrise. Do you understand?"

The metallic crunchings grew louder as hungry steel mouths closed over pine and spruce. The light was brighter, rivaling the glow of the moon.

"Did you hear me, Martin? *We must find those disciples before sunrise!*"

"B—but I've tried before to

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tell men of your beauty. They won't believe me. They think I'm crazy."

"Tonight I'll go with you. I'll help you. I'll *make* them see my beauty. They'll *have* to worship me."

"But they can't see you. They can neither see nor hear you unless they believe in you."

Her eyes flashed. "Just one disciple, Martin! If I find just one, I'll be stronger, strong enough to live away from the throne, strong enough so that others can see me. Then they, too, will believe. They'll begin to give me love, Martin—the love that only young men can give—and I'll be as I used to be. I can give them gifts, even immortality. Promise them that, Martin! Promise them immortality!"

Martin looked at the hostile glow of light. He shivered before the ripping, crunching sounds of the machines.

"I'll try, beautiful Hecate."

As he spoke, the steel-jawed face of chugging metal monster appeared at the edge of the clearing.

Hecate screamed.

They ran. . . .

THE city was a great, bubbling cauldron of swarming humanity. Its deep canyons blazed with the rainbow brightness of shimmering neon. Its air was heavy with the grumble of silver jetmobiles. Overhead, copter-jets swished and darted over the canyon tops like green- and red-eyed bats.

They stumbled through the man-swarm that covered the second-level slidewalk.

"Go where they're unhappy, Martin, where they're dissatisfied."

Martin thought for an instant. "There's a place just a block away. We'll try that first."

Suddenly a coldness and a weariness crept over her. She swayed. "W—wait, Martin. There's something wrong with me."

It was as if a force were sucking the strength and life from her body.

She looked up.

Before her loomed Gothic towers, ornate spires, delicately-stained glass windows. A cathedral. A red-bricked anachronism half-hidden among silver mountains of steel and cement.

She shuddered.

The home of the Unmentionable One. The Great Destroyer of darkness.

There had been a time when she and her brood would have swarmed into a cathedral screeching with evil delight. Now, a single wave of a crucifix, a single drop of holy water would mean oblivion.

"Martin," she breathed, "take me away, please."

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The old man squinted at the cathedral and jerked. "I'm sorry. I—I didn't think."

He led her away, stumbling through the fury of flesh, sound and light.

Strength returned to her and, gradually, a sense of satisfaction came to her. She'd caught only a glimpse of the cathedral's interior, but it had appeared empty. A smile touched her moist red lips. Even the Unmentionable One, it seemed, was not doing so well these days.

"Here we are," puffed Martin. "I'm sure we'll find unhappy, lonely people in here."

THE SPACERAT, said the glowing red sign. The outside of the building was painted the dull, deep yellow of decayed teeth. On the swinging door was a caricature of a black rat sitting in a bowl-like spaceship.

They entered.

A quiet semi-darkness met them like the caress of soft hands. Hecate paused, both surprised and pleased. There *were* those in the city who wanted to escape from the dizzying avalanche of movement and light and sound.

She eyed the men who sat silent at the bar, sipping cool, colored liquids. Yes, she could feel the aura of loneliness in the air, the loneliness of men who escape into shadows.

She spied two young men wearing the white, skin-tight uniforms of the Moon Patrol. Devils of hatred danced in her eyes.

How she hated them! The souls of these empty-eyed rocketmen were as dry and hollow as the tubes of their rockets. These were the men who had robbed the moon of its mystery, its magic and beauty. These were the men who had transformed the moon into a flame-scarred target, a battered bulls-eye in the sky. If only she had the power to swoop down upon them in her *true* form: snake-haired, fire-eyed, fork-tongued!

She whirled away from them, the bottom of her thin robe floating upward like breeze-stirred feathers. "Over there, Martin. The young man at the end of the bar. I can feel his bitterness. Talk to him. He'll believe."

Martin walked up to the black-haired, side-burned man in the faded leather jacket. Hecate stood back, almost afraid to listen as words drifted to her faintly:

". . . a woman," Martin was saying, "most beautiful you ever saw . . ."

A slow, deep, tired voice: ". . . weren't for a woman, I wouldn't be drunk."

Martin's gaunt face was white. Beads of perspiration glittered on his wrinkled forehead. ". . .

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do anything you want . . . never find anyone like . . ."

The young man turned his head, disinterested.

Hecate trembled, then straightened and moved forward seductively. "Martin, tell him about my beauty, my body, tell him how warm my kisses are. Tell him how I make love."

"Y—yes, beautiful Hecate. But—"

She silenced him with a sweep of her hand, sat on the bar stool beside the black-haired young man. She opened her robe to reveal the shadowy whiteness of her large breasts. She crossed her long legs and ran her delicate fingers suggestively down her firm, naked thighs. Her slightly parted lips touched the ear of the bitter-faced young man.

"Can it be," she breathed, "that you don't want to make love to me? It will be as nothing you've ever known."

"Hecate, he can't hear you," whined Martin.

"Silence! Listen to me, young man, hear me. Listen to what my friend says. I can give you—"

The young man turned away. "Damned nut," he muttered.

He downed his drink, cleared his throat, rose, strode to the swinging door.

So swiftly. So very swiftly.

Hecate knew that he was like all the others. He could not measure a philtre's power on a slide rule nor discover Valhalla in a telescope.

Therefore he could not believe.

OUTSIDE again, they stood on the slidewalk. They were tight, silent little islands in the flowing stream of mankind.

At length Martin murmured, "Maybe you could stay alive in the city. After all, I believe in you, and I can love you—just as I used to."

She sighed. "Thank you, Martin, but you know you couldn't. You're—forgive me—an old man."

She stiffened. "Martin, the children! Of course. They could not love me, but at least they would believe. I could keep living. What time is it? Is it too late to find children?"

Martin shook his head. "It's never too late to find children these days. They're so filled with vita-tabs they sleep only an hour or so a night. But children aren't as they used to be. They've changed, too."

"Nonsense! Children never change. Take me to them. Quickly!"

Martin nodded. He began to walk.

The minds of children, thought Hecate. They were like empty bottles, uncapped, new and shining. Why not fill the bottles? Start with the boiling

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potions of superstition. Add the blood-red wines of hatred, the midnight elixirs of fear. Stir well, shake, and cap tightly. Seal them forever against the cold winds of logic!

Down, down the furious streets. Pushing, dodging, stumbling, being pushed, squeezed, thrust, carried forward.

Somewhere in the night a clock struck, its clear tones rising above the babble of the city. It struck once, twice, three times.

Hecate paled. "Three o'clock, Martin. Hurry!"

The old man faltered. He leaned against the side of a building.

"Beautiful Hecate, I'm so tired." He closed his eyes and gasped for breath. "I told you I'd been sick. Let me rest just a minute—"

"No," she snapped. "If dawn comes and we haven't found another believer—" She shuddered, unable to voice the horrible thought.

Martin's eyes opened. "Yes, beautiful Hecate."

Onward. Like scraps of driftwool in a riptide.

AT last a great emptiness lay before them, a blue-floored canyon resting in the midst of towering steel and concrete.

"Here we are," said Martin, panting. "It's the spaceport."

They walked up to a transparent glassite wall that was stripped with red warning lights. Inside, to their right, was a long line of white-domed hangers. Far across the field, as if on the other side of a lake, lay a score of needle-nosed continental rockets. They were huddled in a neat, unbroken row like dead wasps on a collector's display board. Nearer, in the center of the field, three guide-cars were towing a silver rocket of Mars Exploration.

Abruptly, Hecate saw the children.

There were two, boys, one very small, one not so small. Their noses and palms were pressed against the transparent wall. Their eager gazes were hungry tongues devouring the blue miracle before them.

"Be careful, Martin. Don't frighten them."

Martin tottered toward them, touching the wall once and again to keep his balance. Hecate glided after him, her features calm and confident.

"Hi, boys," said Martin.

The boys turned. Their bodies seemed manlike and strangely similar in their white tunics. It was as if they were store manikins, products of molds that differed only in size.

The larger boy, about ten, said, "What's the matter, Mister? You sick?"

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Martin tried unsuccessfully to laugh. "N—no. I just want to tell you something. Would you believe I've found something a lot more fun than watching rockets?"

The smaller boy, about six, seemed interested. "What's more fun than watchin' rockets?"

"It sounds strange, but it's true. Have you heard of invisibility?"

"Sure, like with the Green Flash on TV. But there ain't no such thing, really."

Martin smiled. He was breathing easier now. "No, not so far as science knows. But I'm a scientist, and—" He hesitated, a mock frown creasing his forehead. "No, I guess I'd better not tell you."

Hecate scowled. What in Lucifer was old Martin babbling about? She started to scream a protest.

The older boy stepped back from the wall. "Okay, go on and tell us, Mister."

Suddenly she understood. She clapped her hands. Martin was being clever. The scientific approach. Yes, this was it. Yes, yes! She bent forward, her head shaking with excitement, a black and effervescent cloud hovering over the children.

"It's like this," said Martin. "I was working in my lab—"

"What lab do you work in?" asked the boy.

"My own. My private lab."

The boy snorted. "Nobody works alone. Only the government labs can get equipment. You run along, Mister."

"No," said the smaller boy. "Let's listen to him."

Martin sighed. "Well, like I began to say, I discovered a strange gas, and it—"

"You a para-physiologist?"

"Er, no."

"A psycho-syntheticist?"

"I, er, no, I'm more like a chemist."

The boy crinkled his nose contemptuously.

"Anyway," continued Martin, "this gas makes a person invisible!"

The boys laughed.

"You don't believe me? All right, look over here. Look hard. What do you see?"

"Nothin'"

Hecate stiffened as Martin pointed to her. With all the force of her will she struggled to make herself visible.

Martin coaxed, "You can see someone right here if you try. Just keep looking. Keep trying. You can see her. You *will* see her."

"I don't see nothin'," said the older boy.

Hecate cried, "Look *at* me, not *through* me! I'm here in front of you. See me!"

The smaller boy squinted. His body hunched forward. "Jupiter,

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for a second I thought I did see somethin'. Somethin' black."

"That's it!" exclaimed Martin. "You're seeing her! Keep looking!"

"Aw, you're imagining things," said the older boy. "Let's go home."

"But I wanta see the Mars rocket take off."

"The Mars rocket ain't gonna take off till morning."

The boys turned away.

A sob broke from Hecate's lips. "Wait, children! You almost saw me! Look again, oh please, just once!"

She lunged after them. Her quivering hands touched their eyes, lips, noses, shoulders. Her fingers were like flashing knitting needles weaving invisible coats about the children.

"Look at me, please—"

They passed through her, feeling nothing, seeing nothing.

Bitter realization came to her.

The bottles were already filled, capped, and sealed forever.

THEY walked silently and without purpose. What time was it? Four o'clock? Five? How soon would dawn arrive? She thought of that terrible, final moment when the *real* darkness might arrive. She trembled and forced the vision from her mind.

They came to a small park. The trees and shrubs and grass were cloaked in a darkness broken feebly by lights from the city. Darkness, thought Hecate, was the nearest thing to being home.

They sat wearily upon a rickety bench.

Hecate murmured, "Why is the park empty. Why are we alone?"

"Nobody comes to parks anymore, except maybe lovers now and then. It's too quiet here, and people aren't used to quietness. They're doing away with parks. This is one of the few left."

She smiled grimly. An idea formed in her brain.

"Men can not help us," she mused, "but there is One who might help even now."

Martin was silent.

Hecate rose. "Yes, the greatest of them all, the only one except me who has not perished. The King. The Master of Darkness."

Martin shivered. "Even *he* isn't believed in much any more. I don't think—"

"You don't think *he* could come? I know how to make him come!"

She clasped her hands together, raising her head to the night sky. She felt a hope and a strength returning to her.

"Yes, it would be easy." She glanced down at the bench. "This could be our altar."

Martin sprang up, blinking away his weariness. "I've worshipped you, mighty Hecate, as

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my father and grandfather worshipped you. I've thrilled at your beauty, exalted in your love. B—but I don't like sacrifices."

"Now Martin, you will bring me—"

"No, please—"

"A virgin."

He lowered his gaze. "You mustn't ask that. It isn't right."

She snarled, cat-like. "You're an old man, Martin. You've still a chance for immortality, a chance to be young again. Wouldn't you like to love me as you used to?"

His gaze flicked from side to side, nervously, as if he were seeking a place to hide. "Someone would see us."

"Nonsense. You said yourself that no one comes to parks anymore. A sacrifice would please *him* most. Go, Martin! Bring back a virgin—a girl, soft, young, vibrant, innocent!"

Her voice was charged with an electric savagery that made the old man cringe. There had been a time when the impact of that command would have stilled a screaming wind, silenced a storm-whipped sea. Once, Dagon himself would have cowered beneath its razor-edged fury.

Martin bowed. "Yes, beautiful Hecate. I will bring you a virgin."

SHE waited. The seconds were like heartbeats pumping hatred and desperation through her veins, pumping ever faster.

Soon, footsteps.

Martin was returning, his white face shining in the shadows. Under his arm was a small bundle.

"B—beautiful Hecate, I could not find a virgin, and so—"

"And so you brought a child!" The beat of hatred in her quickened. "Good! Good!"

Martin's mouth quivered. "It is not a child."

She frowned. As he came nearer, she stared at the bundle cradled in his arm.

"Martin!"

A hairy ball of life squirmed uncomfortably in his grasp. It was a tiny white terrier puppy.

She shook with rage and despair. "You idiot!" She spun away from him, her foot stomping the earth.

A stupid, soulless puppy. What an insult to *him*. An insignificant puppy for One who once dreamed of mastering the universe!

She glanced up at the night sky. That light in the East—was it the light of dawn? Had the tortuous moments passed so swiftly?

Fresh terror gripped her. There was little time. Perhaps, she reasoned, even a puppy might have some sort of a soul. Even a puppy's flesh was filled with hot, rich blood. *He* might be pleased after all.

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She whirled back to Martin, eyes like hot coals. "Start the Sabbat. You have cord?"

"Yes, beautiful Hecate."

"Tie the animal to a leg of the bench. A knife?"

"My pocket knife."

"That will do. Hurry!"

THE old man worked slowly and clumsily. His hands were like knotted tree stumps, his breath like the wheezing of a fish flopping on sun-baked sand.

"Now the fire, Martin. A great fire!"

Martin fumbled, gasped, tottered.

Twig upon twig, branch upon branch, limb upon limb.

"More, Martin! A fire that will reach to the moon!"

More branches were ripped from dry sockets. Martin staggered back and forth, thrusting load after load upon the dark pyramid before the bench.

"Excellent, Martin! Light it!"

The scratch of a match, the pinpoint of flame. The ignition, the hissing, the crackling, the explosion of scarlet.

Accompanied by white, billowing smoke, the flames ripped into the night air.

They began the chant. Softly at first, then swelling into a piercing crescendo.

"Dance, Martin! Do *his* dance!"

Martin stood puffing, opening and closing his eyes with each rasping breath.

"Dance! I command you!"

Martin danced. His lean body was like that of a grotesque marionette manipulated by an insane master. The knife in his upraised hand shone crimson in the light of the crackling fire.

The puppy stood shivering, tail between its trembling legs. Its tiny body struggled helplessly against the twine that bound it to the leg of the bench.

"Faster, faster!"

Louder and louder grew the chant. Wilder and wilder became the dance. Higher and higher surged the flames.

"Now, the sacrifice!"

Martin froze in his dance. An idiotic, pain-wracked grin spread over his features. The knife slipped from his hand. He clutched his chest as if it were a bleeding wound.

"Martin! *The sacrifice!*"

Martin fell.

A coldness seemed to sweep over the park, chilling the air's hot hatred, sucking brightness from the flames.

"Martin? What's wrong?" Hecate's voice was no longer shrill. It was a feeble whisper, no louder than the whining of the frightened puppy.

Martin lay on the dark earth. His wide eyes stared for a moment at Hecate. His lips moved, but no sound came forth. The

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words that lay in his throat were never said.

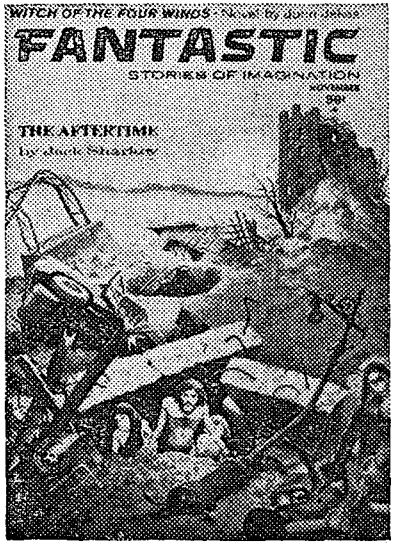
All things were fading—the flames and their crackling, the light and noise from the city, even hatred itself. The world was dissolving like delicate sand sculpture being washed away by a sea tide.

Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, Hecate stared down at her feet, legs, thighs, body. They, too, were dissolving.

She realized that it was not unpleasant. It was like sinking into dark cotton to sleep forever. After all, she remembered, the nearest thing to home was darkness. . . .

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH



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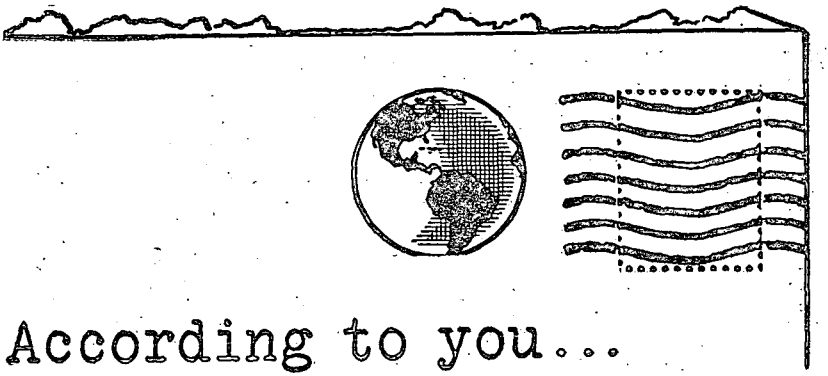

According to you...

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

David R. Bunch has been getting better and better, and I hope he keeps on writing. All his stories for FANTASTIC have been good, except for "Black Cat Weather," which I found unintelligible. My favorite so far has been "One False Step." His stories are like the last couple pages of *1984;* indeed, the world described in them is similar in many ways to that described by Orwell. By all means, Mr. Bunch, keep up the good work!

I was a little disappointed by "The Cloud of Hate." Although it was a good story, it did not come up to Leiber's "The Unholy Grail." Will "Bazaar of the Bizarre" be better?

As for this new writer, Harrison Denmark (is that his real name??), everything but "Monologue for Two," which I could not make anything out of, has been good.

I'm glad to see more stories by Ron Goulart. I particularly liked "Anything for Laughs," which reminded me of Robert Sheckley (by the way, why has there been nothing new by him lately?). Try to get more stories by Sharkey, Bunch, Leiber, Laumer, Sheckley, Young, and Goulart and you might win the Hugo.

Robert Legault
5501 Surrey St.
Chevy Chase 15, Md.

● *Good news for you, Bob: We have stories (jim-dandies) coming up by Sharkey, Bunch, Leiber and Goulart.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

In the search for extra-terrestrial music, in July's editorial: What with your being located north of the Smith-'n-Wesson line (so far from the center of things you know), I can understand a certain loss of contact with current events, but when the good Mr. Lobsenz so blatant-

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ly displayed his ignorance of *the* social event of the year, I felt it my duty to bring you all up to date.

I'm referring, of course, to our annual Monster Rally, at which we honor the aliens who responded to our distress signal of 1956. Every thing who *is* any thing is there, and the music (to say nothing of the musicians), is out of this . . . well, you know. When the first ships touch down, the band comes to life with the traditional songs of greeting; "Star-Ships Fell on Alabama" and "It Came Upon A midnight Queer", commemorating the original event. Then things really begin to boom along as our guests descend from their atomic powered whatzzits and we greet the delegates from each race with their own national anthem. The Psychics from Psaturn are met with the rousing strains of "Oh Say Can You E.S.P?" For the earthworm-like Annalids from Uranus, we play "In The Loaming, Oh My Starling". For the plant-people from Venus—"Green Thighs". The spidery Arachnids from Pluto emerge to "The Merry Black Widow Waltz". The Martians are met with "Carmine"; the shaggy folk from Canis Minor, with "Come To Me, My Mastiff-Collie Baby"; the wispy ghosts from Mercury, with "I've Got you Under My Ectoplasm"; and to the planet Jupiter, which has yet to show signs of life, we dedicate the hopeful "You Must Have Bem, You Bountifull Baby".

All in all, it's a gala occasion, and one not to be sneezed at (if you think the common cold germ is rough, you should try some of the alien varieties!) or ignored, and I certainly hope this missive does much to modify your misconceptions about 'first' contact. After all, someone should have wondered, by now, where we get the courage to say "save your Confederate money, the south shall rise again!"

We got friends, boy, friends!

Tommy Fletcher
Box 24
Dana, N.C.

● *Ah, but you forgot the most important visitor of all: the lizard-like, octopoid, winged, shark-toothed, 12-legged, three-headed rhomboid from Andromeda, at whose (which?) entrance the band played*—It Is Just One of Those Things.

Dear Editor:

I must write a letter to praise your recent issues, particularly, this July, '63 FANTASTIC. Jacquelyn Blair is a genuine find, and I've enjoyed her illustrations in past issues; but this issue, she did an excellent job on the cover and cover story. Keep her by all means, especially because she works in wood-cuts, a rare skill.

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Also Lee Coye and Finlay are fine. Believe me, no other magazine has such a good selection of illustrations in the sf field.

Having raised your price to $.50, I think that you ought to have a wider selection of authors. In recent months, it seems that one small gang turns out your stories (Bunch, Zelazny, Sharkey, Young), and I would hate to see the Ziff-Davis publications get bogged down in that 'house-author' business, which was the undoing of the earlier editions in the '50s. There are so many different, and fine writers available, variety ought to be the keynote. But I certainly commend your use of J. G. Ballard, for he has the stature of an H. G. Wells, and once he masters the novel, he will be far better than Heinlein.

In addition, as I have said in an earlier letter, continue printing Fantasy. There is *no* magazine today keeping this genre alive, except yours. Fantasy-writing is an art form, and a highly skilled one indeed. FANTASTIC has done well, thus far, by not printing trash. Can't Robert Bloch be persuaded into creating something for you?

Phil Brantingham
1517 Lincoln Avenue
Calumet City, Ill.

● *We keep trying to persuade Bloch, but the flesh-pots of Hollywood are hard to compete with.*

Dear Editor:

Oh! Herr Bunch commences to become more palatable with "The Hall of CD.". *Pourquoi?* Because in said "Hall" he (1) loses the flippancy which used to mark his work, (2) does not use the word "Moderan" *one time*, and (3) as a result of (1) and (2), creates an engrossing, chilling, and effective *mood*. All his other stories I've read had moods, but they rang artificial, rather like Moderan itself. And don't counter that a story about an artificial civilization should have an artificial mood, because it shouldn't. If atmosphere is the foundation of your story (as in Bunch's plotless junkets), your story will fall apart into little pieces if its atmosphere isn't genuine.

Maybe Bunch is working toward an ultimate rapport between emotions and the written word. If he is, he all but reached his goal in THOCD. It's the first of his stories that's really chilled me. As Liszt said to Grieg, "Don't let them intimidate you." But don't have a relapse, huh?

Harry Piper
375 Kingsweight Rd.
Atlanta, Ga.

● *And as Mozart said to an old acquaintance, he hadn't seen for a long while, "Where have you been Haydn yourself lately?"*

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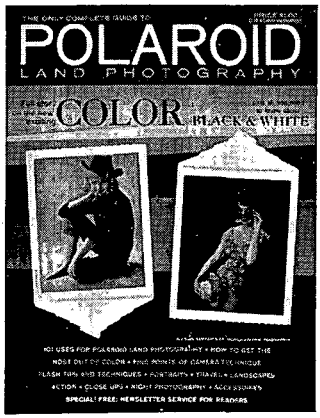

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